

**Interview transcript for Iman Al Hassan**  
**Conducted by Marwa Ghazali on 11/2/17**



**Interviewer:** So okay, so why don't we start by just giving me a little bit of idea about your background, your name, your age, what you study, where you've lived in your life?

**Al Hassan:** Okay, so my name is Iman, and I am 22 years old, and I am about to finish my bachelor's degree in Health Sciences. And I have three brothers and I am the only girl in my family. Two older and one younger. And I was basically raised in Missouri my whole life. When my parents first moved here, they were in New York, and then they kind of settled in the Midwest after that; after a few years. So I was born in Columbia, Missouri, and then we lived in Kansas City for about a year, and then we moved to St. Louis after that. And then from there we came back to Kansas City, so I kind of just always stayed in Missouri my whole life. And I basically considered Kansas City home, because that's kind of where I feel like most of my development happened and most of my memories started here in Kansas City.

**Interviewer:** Okay, cool. So you call Kansas City home then?

**Al Hassan:** Correct, yes.

**Interviewer:** So why don't you tell me a little bit about your parents' background? How they came here, why they picked America, and why they picked Kansas and Missouri in particular. Was it work related, was it ... did you have people there already or did they have people there? So just a little bit about what you know of your parents' migration story.

**Al Hassan:** Okay, yeah. So my parents are originally from Nigeria, they were born and raised there. My mom is from a village, a very small village, and my dad is from the city. And I believe she was sixteen or seventeen when she married him, and he was in his late 20's, early 30's. And he originally had a scholarship to go to McGill in Canada, so he got engaged to my mom and then left to Canada for a year to do his master's degree, went back to Nigeria, got her, and they moved to New York. And they lived in Staten Island for I think two years, where he had a scholarship to go to school. And I don't know which degree was he pursuing there, but I do know that he did not finish his education that he had started in Staten Island and he came to Columbia, Missouri and started his Ph.D. program. So it was definitely education that had led them here, and I guess it was just by chance of scholarship and school and opportunity, but I know just from talking to my mom a lot... she was just... she was really raised to be a housewife, and so her decision to follow my dad wasn't really a decision. It was just kind of like she fell in love with this guy, they got married, and he was like, Well, I'm going to school, and you know, this is where I'm going... I'm going to the United States," and so she followed him. And I know from them... they always used to talk about how the plan was never to stay in the United States, but staying here kind of happened by accident. But my dad's goal was always just to finish school, get an education, and then go back to Nigeria, and teach there or pursue some sort of career where he could help his people and live, and settle, and have a life there. And because of that reason, my mom never really pursued getting an education; she did finish her high school degree there in Nigeria, but it took her a while before she pursued a GED and decided to go back to school, just simply because they were never planning on settling here. They've always kind of been longing to go back home, even after they knew that they were staying here to settle, they still consider Nigeria home. Even when they talk to us, they say, "back home". So much so that sometimes I will say "back home", even though Nigeria has never been a place where I've ever

lived. I've only ever visited it for a matter of weeks. But I will sometimes find myself saying "back home" to a place that doesn't feel like home to me, but it's just ingrained me from being raised by my parents.

**Interviewer:** What are some of the ways that your parents brought Nigeria into your life in Missouri? Are there stories of Nigeria that they told you over and over again that you remember? Are there specific practices or traditions, ways of dressing? What are the very obvious and then also the subtle ways that Nigeria became a part of your life?

**Al Hassan:** So, definitely, I think the major part would be the language component. Growing up bilingual, the language what we speak is Hausa, which is one of the main languages spoken in West Africa in general, not just in Nigeria. And for me, I think the language component is the one that I feel most connected to to consider myself a Nigerian, and so it's the one that I hold on to the most. And I mean even now, I make it a point to speak to my parents in Hausa more than English, as much as I can. Even though my mom has spent all of her adult life here in the United States, and so English is as much her first language as Hausa is, but I make it a point to speak to her in it, because I am definitely afraid that if I stop I'm going to lose it, and then I lose the part of me that feels most Nigerian. So language is definitely a really big component. And just hearing the way they speak, whenever they are speaking Hausa, like the passion in their voices. If they are yelling at us, sort of talking to us, or trying to get us to understand something, it definitely switches, and they speak their mother tongue, which is Hausa, better than English. So I think I've always kind of connected to those differences and realized that when they switch languages, it's important, and I kind of listen, and I take a step back from myself and try to pay attention more when they are speaking Hausa versus when they are speaking English. So I think for me the language really connected to it for that reason. And then, we have traditional clothing that we wear whenever there is a special occasion, like a wedding or a holiday or something like that. And although those don't happen very often, I feel like that's very significant and that sets me apart from everyone else... that I have those options, that I have these different kinds of clothing. And it's interesting here because when I wear them, people think that they are so fancy and very colorful and very over the top and what kind of special occasion is this... and meanwhile that's people's everyday dress back there. So even though that doesn't happen very often, I think that's kind of a very obvious difference. As well as the food that we grew up with, and even just you know trying to battle spicy food, because I don't necessarily love spicy food, but I can tolerate it, and sometimes I'll crave it. I'll be like, I really want to eat spicy food. This type of spice that we have, that's kind is a signature taste. Or there'll be a type of flavor that I'm craving and, you know, I'll tell my mom, "Can you please make this, because I really want to taste this." And it's funny because me and my friends will have conversations like very strange conversations like, "If you were on death row, what would you want your last meal to be?" And my answer to that was like I really want a feast of all these different kinds of like Hausa Nigerian foods, and I find that even if I don't subconsciously think about it all the time, I am really connected. And Nigeria is home for me because of the culture that my parents brought and raised us with... both alongside the American culture that, you know, I kind of learned from my own environment and experimenting and asking questions and going to public school my whole life, versus being at home and just kind of being purely Nigerian. So, I find that the food, the language and even just the clothing, those are really important. And then I guess the subtle differences would just be, you know, every two or three years when we do back to visit Nigeria to see our family. My mom has a very large extended ... like my extended family is very large on my mom's side. And it's interesting, because growing up I know that she's always been very close to her sisters and her brothers and hearing them talk on the phone and the kind of conversations that they have about their children. Like, paying attention to that and kind of hearing and knowing that my mom's family was always very important to her and being estranged from them has always been very difficult for her. So much so that it's difficult for me sometimes to listen to her talk to them, because I know how much it hurts her sometimes that they're far away from each other. Sometimes, when it's something that they're celebrating or something that they're crying over, grieving over and the distance really makes it difficult for them to be around each other. But being able to go and visit, and every

time I go I have a different experience and a good experience, but it's just different every time and I think as I get older, I appreciate it more and more for different reasons.

**Interviewer:** So your mom, she goes back and visits every few years, and it sounds like you do too. But that's kind of made you more aware of your mom's pain, more aware of what she sacrificed. Can you talk about how that's impacted your relationship with your mom?

**Al Hassan:** I think it's made us very close, and now I feel like we're at this place where we're very open with each other and my mom is really my best friend. She'll come in after she has a conversation with her sister or something and tell me and be like, "So, this is happening or this is going on" and I'm like "Oh this is sad" and we'll kind of talk about it in conversation style like, "How can we help them?, What can we do?" - versus before I would just kind of be an outsider listening in to this conversation that my mom was having with her siblings, and, you know, I didn't feel connected to them like they were necessarily my family, but I considered them her family. Whereas now, they feel more like my family. I think that was just more of a maturity thing of kind of not understanding the value of family, and I think the issue ... like me personally, that was because of the distance. Because, you know, I can only see these people for like three weeks every two or three years, and then it's always in a hurry. It's always in a rush. It's always like, "I'm sorry that I'm here, and I have to leave tomorrow or in a couple of days". Having a big family - it's really nice, but it's also more stressful at the same time. So there's always a lot going on. So because of that, I never had... I never felt like I had time to understand them or feel like they were family. They've always just been kind of like familiar strangers. But now that I'm older, I can sit down and have better conversations with my mom, and I feel like learning from her about her family helps me understand her better. And understanding her better helps me understand myself better, about the choices that I've made, and why I think the way I do about certain things. We sit down a lot and have conversations about her parents - my grandparents, because both of them passed ... well my grandfather passed away before I was born, and my grandmother passed away before I had time to appreciate her, because I was too young. So we sit down a lot and we have conversations and I'll ask her questions, because for me it's my connection to understanding myself and being able to uncover about my own personality.

**Interviewer:** So your mom keeps in touch with her family. How does she do that? How frequently is she in touch with them? How frequently are you in touch with them? For example on special occasions, do you guys do the traditional phone call like my family does, where everybody has to be like "Happy *Eid*, Happy *Eid*." You know, you kind of know them, but not really. And like you feel connected to them, but not really. So, yeah, how does she communicate with them and how often?

**Al Hassan:** It's definitely developed over the years. It used to be just kind of be phone calls every few months or so. Especially I think since her parents died, it's been, you know, they don't keep up with each other as much. But now we have all of these messaging apps and stuff like that, so I know that they have all these different Whatsapp groups for different groups in the family. So, actually recently, about a month ago, me and my siblings were added to the large Whatsapp family group that has I think like 250 contacts inside. So, you know, everybody goes in there once a year and can write "Happy *Eid*" and same time somebody can go in and say, oh it's so and so's birthday. You know, everybody will write happy birthday, or I can post like "Oh, I'm graduating soon" and everybody will say a prayer for me and say congratulations. And so for me, I like that, because it's a way for me to stay connected. It's also interesting, I think, because we speak all in Hausa on that family Whatsapp group. So it challenges me that I have to go in and read it, and then because the language is so important to me, I like going in. And even if I don't comment or have anything to say, just going in and reading, and just feeling like I am more connected to my family this way. And then at the same time just being in the group makes me feel like "Okay, I am part of this family. And I am part of this group."

**Interviewer:** So let's talk about your life in Kansas City then. What kind of a community, if any, are you a part of? How did your parents meet people and become friends with people? Did they meet Nigerians? Did they meet other ethnicities? You know, is there a group that you feel more comfortable with? How would you go about making friends? So let's talk about you and your family's social life in Kansas City.

**Al Hassan:** So my parents are very fluid socially. They don't necessarily stick to one group or another or have one group they prefer to go to over another. They're kind of very easy going when it comes to friends and social groups. And I think that's because they kind of started their family life in Columbia, which was a very small town. It was a university... it is university town. So it's a very diverse for me to meet different groups of people from different backgrounds and different ethnicities. So, I think that background for them was really beneficial for when they moved to Kansas City, because there wasn't this angst or issue of "I need to go to the Nigerians, because that's where I am and that's where I belong". It was just kind of like "Well, I'm a Muslim, and I need to belong to belong to a Muslim community." And I think that was the most important thing for them. And then finding that Muslim community and then, more so, just finding the same couple or family that have the same ideology as them. And that didn't always necessarily mean that they were connecting more with the Nigerians versus another group. But I do find that when we are at a function or an event that has more Nigerians than anybody else or is an all-Nigerian event, there is kind of this more relaxed sense of belonging... or this more relaxed aura about my parents and even myself, just because we're all speaking the same language. We all understand each other. We're all eating the same food that we know. The culture of that generation from my parents that came from Nigeria to the United States for school or for work or for opportunities... had their kids here, raised their kids here. That's all extremely familiar. And so I always feel more relaxed in those settings. But at the same time, my parents did a very good job of giving us this very wide variety of group setting. And so for me personally, I didn't have a group of ten Muslim friends and then ten other friends. I kind of just picked and choose and, you know, whoever I was comfortable with was who I surrounded myself with. And even now I find myself... I do have a lot of African friends... they're not Nigerian, but they are African. And when I am around them or when we're talking or when I go to their house, I have a better sense of etiquette when I'm dealing with their parents for something like that versus my Arab friends or my American friends, even though the majority of my social group are mostly Muslims. But it's still different in terms of how I'm with them, and how I represent myself when I'm with them. But I do respect and love the fact that I know how to be around different types of people in all different social settings and that's just because my parents were always very fluid with their social life.

**Interviewer:** What does it mean for you to be Nigerian, a woman, Muslim, a first generation American, in the Midwest? How do you reconcile these identities?

**Al Hassan:** Yeah, so I don't know if there is an answer to that. I think I'm still learning and trying to understand a lot about myself. I'm still trying to search and understand how do I balance all of these identities and how do I wear every hat. And at what point is it appropriate to be more one thing than another. Definitely after this election, I was thinking to myself a lot like, "Okay. What is my role? What is my purpose? Who am I supposed to be at this point in time?" And not only that, trying to be a good role model for my younger brother, as well as trying to still stand my ground with my siblings in general, and just trying to make sure that they understand and that they see me representing myself as all these different identities as best as I can, as well as trying to make my parents proud. So it's a lot, and it's hard, and I don't think there is an answer for how it works, but one thing I know about myself is that I've never been comfortable with people trying to put me in a box, or in a category, because it's easier for them to understand. And so because of that, I'm very outspoken and I'm very open-minded and open-hearted, and I try to go after different opportunities, and I like learning because I feel like I have this multi-faceted personality with all these different identities. I don't just pick one thing and go towards it. And a big part of that is because when I was growing up, it was always really funny, because I had these different identities that I was trying to understand how to take the best of both or all of them. And it was difficult, there was no right answer. There was no way

that I could be the perfect American daughter and the perfect Muslim daughter and the perfect African daughter and the perfect African-Muslim-American daughter without just having to deal with the negatives of all sides. As well as dealing with the fact that my parents would sometimes feel like "this is how American children are and you're not allowed to be that way." And in my head I'm thinking "well, I am an American child, and I don't know how to separate myself from that." And I think that's kind of how I am now as an adult too, trying to tell people, trying to get them see me as...you know, I'm not one or the other, I'm and/both, and I think that's difficult for people to understand. And I'm still trying to dissect pieces of my personality and understand where it is that I fit. But I think how I've chosen to go about that is to be an advocate for minorities, since I am this multi-minority status of a person. So I think advocacy is important, and I've taken upon myself to be the person that is going to explain "this is what Hijab is," "this is what Islam is, and this is what it isn't," "this is what it means to be a Muslim," "I'm just a person like you are," "This is what it means to be of African descent and African heritage." Because I do find that I have a difference with African-Americans who have a long history of ancestry in the United States, versus myself where I can trace my ancestry all the way back and I know where I came from, and I don't have roots here in the United States. I do see a difference in culture and understanding. And there is a lot about African-Americans that I don't understand or I can't identify with because of that ancestral difference. So just trying to be an advocate for everything that I am, and taking it upon myself to say "Here is everything that I am, and here is everything that I am not ... and I'm allowed to be whoever I want to be." And I guess trying to grow in that. All while trying to balance being a normal person, and being mentally healthy and physically healthy, and it's a lot. And it's really interesting because life has your ups and downs, and you have your good days and your bad days, and sometimes I find like on my bad days that I'm grasping at my different backgrounds, trying to pull myself together being one thing or another. Like, if I'm having a bad day emotionally or something, I'm like, "okay, I just need to be a strong Muslim right now," versus when I'm out in public and I'm experiencing racism or I feel there's racial tension around, I'm like, "Okay, no, I need to be a strong black woman right now." Or if I'm at school, and people are misinformed, then I'm like, "Okay, no, I just need to be a strong human being right now. I just need to be a good person in general." So I find that very interesting that whenever I'm in a different situation, I kind of have to think to myself, "Okay. The strongest of this part of me has to come out right now in order for me to survive this situation and move forward."

**Interviewer:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think I can connect to that as well. Sort of having to change, or bring out different aspects of who we are to deal with the situation at hand.

**Al Hassan:** Absolutely, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Who do you reach out to when you want to talk about things, or when you have issues, or when you want to celebrate something in your own life? Are there specific people, friends, or again a community that you kind of go to?

**Al Hassan:** Yeah. I have my small group of best friends that are very, very smart, caring, intellectual girls that have their own stories. And interestingly enough, two of them that I connect very well to are African... they're East African. And they have their own stories of how they were born in refugee camps, and they went through a lot with their families and kind of having to be these survivors of war and displacement, which is not how my story is at all. You know, my parents came here by choice to make a better life for themselves, whereas for them, they didn't have a choice. They came here because they didn't have a home to stay at anymore. And so, I go to them, just in general to kind of talk about my issues of, "Okay, I'm struggling with this section of my identity, or I have to make this decision and I don't know where this decision needs to come from. Or I don't know at what point of strength or weakness I need to kind of figure all this information out." And because we've faced similar struggles growing up, of trying to deal with everything that we are while trying to please our parents, with the struggles and the backgrounds that they've had to overcome and accomplish in order to assimilate in the United States and feel like they belong here, you know, it's easier to

connect with them, and be able to share stories of happiness or sadness with them. And we're all college students basically trying to figure out where our places in the world, and... so it's easy to connect with them. And you know, I find... and then at the same time, it's like, you know, we're here and our families are estranged from us because they're either back in Africa or they're displaced somewhere else. So there's also that understanding that we don't have these cousins to go to across the street or in another state. We're kind of all that we have for each other here. And so because of that they become the family that we choose, which I think makes it a very strong and powerful bond. And especially now being a young adult, I feel like the friends that I have that I'm making now are the friends that I'm definitely going to stay with, because we're all kind of transitioning at the same rate. We're all transitioning at the same time into the same kind of next part of our lives at the same time. So that's really helpful and beneficial for me.

**Interviewer:** As you move on into this next stage with a lot of political change, a lot of social change, or maybe not change but sort of resuscitation of our nation's past, how do you see that future here in America? Do you see a future for yourself and your friends and other women like you who come from African backgrounds, but also from different religious backgrounds with different expectations of family and community and contributions?

**Al Hassan:** I definitely do, and I definitely... I recognize... obviously I have my own fears and my own way of handling and dealing with things, but I definitely choose to stay on the side of optimism. I have to, because as many horrible things that there are going on in the world, there's equally as many good things and good people in the world. And I definitely am the kind of person that believes that if you can't find a good person in the world, then you have to be that person. And so for me myself personally, I find myself kind of having goals and dreams that kind of exist outside of the United States, but at the same time, I'm still going to stay connected, because the United States is my home. Like it's where I... it's everything that I know. As much as I am this diverse person, I'm that much more American. And so this is always going to be home for me, and as bad as it gets, it's still going to be home. And as crazy as the political climate is right now, I can't imagine that I'm ever going to exist anywhere else. But at the same time, like my goals for life ... in terms of my career and what I want to accomplish and how I need to be successful in order to prove to myself that I was a useful human being in my time, I definitely feel that I have to take everything that I'm learning and experiencing, and I have to go help other people in other countries, in developing countries especially ... in countries that don't have the fortunate ability to even dream about the kind of problems that we have in the United States. And I really see myself kind of moving forward or transitioning into going to those other places and accomplishing global health initiatives that I've kind of set in place for myself. And, um, as for my friends, they are also very much like... they're very service-oriented and goal-oriented, but they don't have the same dreams or ideas as I do. And a lot of them, you know, they're just kind of like, "Well, I just want to get married, and I want to have a family, and I want to have a stable job, and I want to be happy." For them, that is the goal. And that's beautiful and there's nothing wrong with that. So we have different directions definitely that we're going, but for me, I definitely see that the next part of my journey involves more migration.

**Interviewer:** That's beautiful. Well, I want you to know that I think by sharing your story, you've helped me understand parts of my own story that I've had trouble articulating as another kind of African woman who is also American who has a different, maybe, cultural background. But it's also struggling to understand the role I'm supposed to play. how to balance between what my family wants and what I want for myself. And I think that your story is going to help a lot of people who don't know about Africa or Nigeria or what it means to be a generational immigrant... that means someone who was born here, but because of the way we think about immigration, we can continue to assign or attribute that immigration identity to them. So even though you haven't made that migration, I think it's really factored into who you are, and I feel that way, too. And hearing you motivates me to continue to collect stories, to continue to speak with people who have stories that they want to share, and to reach out to people who are afraid to share their stories. You are so brave for

saying the things that you say, and you're so beautiful for wanting for the world to be better when you leave it than when you've come into it. And I find that just to be exactly what America needs and has always needed. And thank you so much for sharing your time with us, for sharing your experiences with us, and giving us your insights and sharing a part of who you are with us.

**Al Hassan:** Yeah, I definitely appreciate this opportunity, and I think it's been really helpful, because being able to break out of my shell a little bit and open up and talk to you and share parts of my story with you kind of lets light into a part of my heart that I think I need to keep reserved ... that I need to keep hidden, because I think that it's not beautiful, or because I think that it's not a part of me that matters. I think it's important for people to realize that they matter simply because they exist. And so I've also learned a lot just by sitting here talking to you. I feel brave, and I feel a lot better just to be able to talk to you.

**Interviewer:** Well, you are brave. And I cannot wait to see what you're going to accomplish. Absolutely. You're going to do amazing things, Iman.

**Al Hassan:** Thank you, I appreciate this opportunity, and it's been really fun talking to you.