



AFRICAN COMMUNITY IN MELBOURNE

by **Bedellu Desta**

Community Development Worker
African Communities
Ecumenical Migration Centre, Victoria

The topic of this paper is Indigenous African settlements in Melbourne.

The sources of this paper are as follows:

1. A recently released research paper jointly sponsored by the Bureau of Immigration Research and the Ecumenical Migration Centre in Melbourne, Victoria by Dr. Trevor Batrouney under the title of Selected African Communities in Melbourne: Their Characteristics and Settlement Needs.
2. My direct experience as a Community Development Worker with African communities.

AFRICAN MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

Until the early 1980s, migration from Africa was only for those whose colour of skin was white. However, there was a small number of indigenous African settlers. Almost all of them came as students or were married to Australian citizens.

Whilst the White Australia Policy was eliminated in 1973, it has only been since 1983 that Africans began to migrate to Australia. However even since then, intake of Africans has only been token. This is because up until June, 1991 only up to 200 indigenous Africans, per annum, were allowed to migrate to Australia.

However, not more than 150 Africans per annum have managed to migrate to Australia during the past few years. Almost all of the people who come here are refugees. I know no-one who has come here as an independent migrant. What does this mean? It means that Africans are not welcome in Australia for a reason that I am yet to learn.

AFRICANS IN MELBOURNE

Refugees mainly "from the Horn of Africa began arriving in Australia in 1982-83 and totalled some 1,355 people by 1989-90. Victoria received as much as 57 per cent of Australia's total migration from the Horn of Africa, including 82 per cent of the total intake from Ethiopia and 78 per cent from Somalia". (Dr. Trevor Batrouney, Selected African Communities in Melbourne (1991) (by the Bureau of Immigration Research), page xii).

African settlers in Australia are small in number but very diverse in terms of nationality and ethnic background. There is also clear evidence of ideological differences. But in terms of religious beliefs, they are mostly Christians or Muslims. The large majority of African settlers in Australia have been young and single men and the ratio approximately 8:2. The average age of Africans in Australia is 24 years. As at the end of 1990, the ratio between male and female had altered to

become 6:4. This is directly attributed to the fact that the single men who came to Australia in 1983/84, then went on to sponsor wives and fiancées. Even then, up to about 70 per cent of Africans are single. (1 Ibid, page xiii).

The majority of African settlers in Australia came under refugee, special humanitarian and the family reunion schemes, which means most of the African settlers come from refugee camps or similar places. Refugees have fled due to civil war and political hardship in their own countries. Certainly, not many of them come to Australia by choice. As they were forced to run away from their country and they had nowhere to go, they all had gladly accepted the offer of a country for resettlement. As Dr. Batrouney put it "before their arrival in Australia the refugees, in particular, experienced great and enforced mobility as indicated by multiple relocations within Africa, especially the Horn of Africa ..." (2 Ibid page xiii).

Although the large majority of Africans in Australia are settled in Melbourne, there is no one particular area where they are located. Africans are dispersed all over Melbourne. The research paper bears this out. According to this paper, Africans are living in "37 different local government areas of Melbourne with concentrations in the south-eastern, inner and western suburbs. The majority lived with their immediate family or other relatives in rented accommodation; though nearly 20 per cent lived alone". (3 Ibid page xiii).

LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Compared to other ethnic groups, Africans are largely well educated. About 70 per cent of Africans in Melbourne have "some form of trade or post-school qualification". (4 Ibid page xiii). However, nearly half of them are waiting for their qualifications to be recognized. Many have been waiting for too long and have given up.

Despite the fact that most Africans are highly qualified and a number of them have

got their qualifications recognised, a high proportion is unemployed or underemployed. It is not uncommon to see a highly qualified African working in a factory as a process worker, or on a tram as a conductor or driver, or on a bus as a bus driver, or at a railway station as a ticket checker. As a result, there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with jobs. Only a very small proportion of Africans are employed in professional or technical areas. As most are process workers, they have been amongst the first to lose their jobs as a result of the recession.

According to Dr. Batrouney's findings "only a half of the Africans surveyed were employed with 32 per cent depending on unemployment and other benefits. Around a half of the respondents received incomes below \$287 per week and as many as 80 per cent of the respondents considered they were living just at or below the poverty line". (5 Ibid, page xiii).

As a high proportion of African settlers are well educated, there is no doubt that they would be able to contribute to Australia's economic and social development. It is a criminal act against our society not to use the expertise of migrants to the maximum advantage. If Australia wants to be "a clever country", it must act cleverly and not waste those resources.

SETTLEMENT PROBLEMS

Separation and divorce are very high within African communities in Melbourne. This has been caused by a number of factors. For example, lack of extended family and community leaders, unemployment, loneliness, unrealistic expectations of what Australia could offer, change in attitude of African women about their expected role as a wife, the inability of the husband to fulfil his traditional role as a head of the family and the sole provider and drug and alcohol abuse.

Two important parts are missing in making the African communities whole. They are the elders and the extended family unit. In African society, the elders and

extended family unit play a vital role in maintaining social norms, resolving conflicts, teaching social values, and as spiritual leaders. Australia's immigration policy clearly discriminates against the elders. As a result, the average age of Africans is 24 years. Dr. Batrouney acknowledged that "lack of constraining forces such as an extended family, community leaders, African churches and mosques" are the main contributing factors for high level of separation and divorce among the community.

The traditional marriage relationship requires that men have financial responsibility for their wives. With some women working, men are losing their financial domination over their wives, the traditional marriage relationship becomes irrelevant for the wife, and the husband desperately tries to maintain the status quo. Naturally, this has become a source of conflict and a contributing factor to domestic violence.

The other source of problem is the level of freedom that the African men have in terms of integration with Australian society in particular. While it is acceptable for African men to mix quite freely with the mainstream Australian community and to make friends, women are very much restricted to their own community. Therefore, this unfair advantage men have causes a resentment among women. In addition, the women tend to mistrust their husband's loyalty. As a result, the women demand that the only time that their husbands will go out alone will be to work. Otherwise she wants to be with him all the time to make sure that he is behaving himself. Obviously this is causing a great deal of problems for their relationship.

The relationship between African women in Melbourne is not very healthy at all. As most of them are very young and with almost the same level of education and social background, there is a very hostile competition between them. The competition ranges from the type of furniture to the weekly grocery list expense, which means the more you spend the better you are. As a result, if a woman dares to be different, she will be the target of devastating attack and isolation. In order to keep up with the competition, they have to borrow money or buy on credit. This is also one of the main contributors to marriage breakdown.

There is a great deal of tension too among African men in Melbourne. They are divided based on ethnic, clan, religion and ideological affiliation. One could say that this division is almost exclusively men's problem. This is especially clear among Africans from the Horn of Africa. It is because of this that Africans in Melbourne have failed to form a united and strong community organization despite the fact that they have been trying to do this since 1981. There are about 19 African organizations in Melbourne, however only about half of them are functional, most exist as names only. They are based on ethnicity and nationality. As with their women counterparts, there is a great deal of jealousy and rivalry between the men. Therefore, if an African man has achieved or is in the process of achieving something, he will receive all sorts of hostility from his countrymen. However, there are many positive things also. To start with, all Africans see each other as sisters and brothers. Therefore, when an African faces a problem, many of them will come to his or her side and will try to help no matter how hard it may be, which means the conflicts I have outlined above are conflicts which are very common within a large family.

Although there is no strong and well represented umbrella organization, there are a number of organizations which are very well run and developing very fast.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Africans in Australia are experiencing a high level of racial discrimination. This has been more obvious against Africans who are seeking professional jobs. In addition, many Africans are complaining of racial harassment at work, shopping centres and schools. As most Africans are employed as process workers, they have been easy targets for racial vilification and systematic discrimination. For example, they have been always selected for harder and dirtier work, they do not get their fair share of over-time, they are the first to be retrenched.

The other major offender is the media. The Australian media reports only the worst picture of Africa; usually over exaggerated and sensationalized. This kind of presentation has created a very negative image of Africa. This then clearly reflects on the attitude of the Australian public. Therefore, the ill-informed individuals hold a low opinion of Africans. This then leads them to make unacceptable remarks against Africans.

