

Africa: Moving the Boundaries

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Race and Ethnicity: Similarity and Distinction in Identities of Contemporary African Migrants and African Americans

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Abstract

From 1980 to 2012, the African-born population in United States grew from just under 200,000 to 1.6 million. What has surprised or even shocked African immigrants in North America is that race remains a significant and pressing social category; racialised power relations and hierarchical differentiation exist, and people of black African descent are still struggling to define and redefine their identities, roles, and places in the global community. As Marilyn Halter (2007) stated, the foreign-born blacks come to realize that their cultural distinctiveness does not shield them from racism and discrimination. Their black skin color also serves as an ascribed marker of ethnic and cultural identity and membership or belongingness to the group, as well as marks them for discrimination and prejudice from the wider society. This paper investigates the complexity and ambiguity of the relations between old African-American communities and emerging African communities. It attempts to find an answer to the question: why, despite the congeniality of many cultural myths and ideological settings, African-Americans and Africans are different communities with certain specificity of relationships? The paper presents the results of the research projects, *African Americans and Recent African Migrants in the USA: Cultural Mythology and Reality of the Intercommunity Relations* (2013) and, *The Relations between African-Americans and Recent African Migrants: The Socio-Cultural Aspects of Intercommunity Perception* (2014-2016), supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanitarian Research, grant #14-01-00070.

Introduction

International migration has become a major epiphenomenon in Africa today. The sheer volume and scope of this migration is unprecedented. The current migration of the well-educated is one of the major social and cultural transformations shaping the future of the region. However, the migration of skilled and educated labor is not confined to Africans with internationally marketable skills. African and Asian professionals are competing in all areas of professional and skilled jobs in the United States in particular. (Arthur 2010, p. 48). In case of the United States, it is very interesting to look at the relationship between African Americans and the “new Diaspora” of African immigrants to the United States. The relationship is complex, sometimes not without conflict, but the two groups can no longer continue to segregate themselves from each other. In the future, the voice of African immigrants is likely to gain ground in areas of both domestic and foreign policy as Africans and African Americans prove to be valuable resources to each other.

Methods and collected evidence

The field studies were done in the USA in September to November 2013, August 2014 and September to October 2015. In 2013, a team of researchers directed by Prof. Dmitri Bondarenko started a study of mutual perception and relationships between Black

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communities in the USA. To date, the research has been conducted in seven states (Alabama, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, and Missouri), in a number of towns, as well as in cities (Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, and Saint-Louis). The methods of interview (structured, semi-structured, and non-structured) and observation were used. Extensive structured interviews, usually done by preliminary appointment, were recorded on tape. In total, in 2013-2015, the work on the topic of the project was done in 13 towns, mid-size and big cities of seven states: Albertville, Guntersville, and Huntsville in Alabama, Chicago and Evanston in Illinois, Boston, Cambridge, and Springfield in Massachusetts, Minneapolis in Minnesota, St. Louis in Missouri, New York City in New York, and Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. 196 interviews and conversations of different duration and degree of structuring were recorded, notes of observations of many events in the lives of African Americans and African migrants were made; the photo archive consists of 806 photos.

Statistic Data on modern African migration

While the trans-Atlantic slave trade brought large numbers of Africans to the United States as forced migrants from the 16th to the 19th centuries, significant voluntary migration from Africa to the United States began in the 1980s. In 1970, there were about 80,000 African immigrants, representing less than 1 percent of the total foreign-born population. During the following four decades, the number of foreign-born people from Africa grew rapidly, roughly doubling each decade. From 1980 to 2012, the African-born population in United States grew from just under 200,000 to 1.6 million. Today, according to the 2008-2012 American Community Survey (ACS), Africans make up a small (about 4 percent) but growing share of the country's 39.8 million immigrants (Gambino *et al* 2014). Over 75% of the African immigrants came to live in the United States after 1990. (Grieco *et al* 2012). This data does not include the more than 10,000 African students that enter U.S. universities every year. In fact, many historians estimate that more Africans have immigrated to the United States since 1980 than came to the United States during the entire period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

In 2009, almost two-thirds of African immigrants were from East and West Africa, but no individually reported country accounted for more than 14.1 percent of the foreign-born from the Africa region. The top countries of origin for African immigrants were Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, and Kenya. Classes of admission for African immigrants who gained lawful permanent residence in 2010 were also diverse, with 48 percent having done so through family relationships, 24 percent through the diversity visa program, 22 percent as refugees and asylum seekers, 5 percent through employment, and the rest through other means. Compared to other foreign-born populations, African immigrants reported higher levels of English proficiency and educational attainment in 2008-2012, and were more likely to be of working age and to participate in the labour force.

African immigrants were also more likely to be recent arrivals to the United States and to live in households with an annual income below the poverty line. There were substantial differences between origin countries with respect to the share living in poverty. For example, immigrants from Nigeria (10.6 percent), Morocco (10.8 percent), Sierra Leone (13.5 percent), and Ghana (14.6 percent) were much less likely than African immigrants overall to live below the federal poverty line. In contrast, almost half of all immigrants from Somalia (49.9 percent) live in poverty, and poverty rates for immigrants from Guinea (42.7 percent) and Sudan (41.2 percent) are also well above the average for African immigrants overall. Somalia

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and Sudan have both accounted for a large number of refugee admissions over the past decade. In 2008-2012, the top five countries of origin for the 1.6 million African immigrants in the United States were Nigeria (209,908, or 14.1 percent of all African immigrants), Ethiopia (148,221, or 9.9 percent), Egypt (138,194, or 9.3 percent), Ghana (108,647, or 7.3 percent), and Kenya (87,267, or 5.8 percent). No individually reported country accounted for more than 14.1 percent of the African immigrant population.

Over one-third of all African immigrants resided in New York, California, Texas, and Maryland. New York had the largest number of African immigrants in 2009, with 168,426 individuals or 11.3 percent of the total African-born population, followed by California (143,214, or 9.6 percent), Texas (124,691, or 8.4 percent), and Maryland (117,315, or 7.9 percent). The African-born in these states collectively accounted for 37.1 percent of all African immigrants. Other states with African immigrant populations greater than 60,000 in 2009 included New Jersey (79,420, or 5.3 percent), Massachusetts (76,832, or 5.1 percent), Georgia (75,692, or 5.1 percent), Virginia (69,941, or 4.7 percent), and Minnesota (63,982, or 4.3 percent). African-born adults were more likely than the native-born to have a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. In 2009, 41.7 percent of African-born adults aged 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 28.1 percent of native-born adults and 26.8 percent of all foreign-born adults. Of these, 25 percent of Africans reported a bachelor's degree as their highest credential, compared to 17.9 percent of the native born and 15.8 percent of immigrants. Additionally, 16.7 percent of Africans reported having a higher degree than a bachelor's, compared to 10.2 percent of the native-born and 11.0 percent of immigrants.

For many of Africa's immigrant population in the United States, a major reason given for leaving Africa is to escape the continent's persistent political turmoil, civil unrest, war, and factionalism. Political instability has stalled the continent's push toward creating stable regimes and democratically centered institutions of governance. The lack of political accountability and transparency is a major cause of the deterioration of Africa's political governance structures. A majority of the immigrants cited this as a primary consideration in their decision to migrate. For other immigrants, the perceived fear of instability and violence accompanied by feelings of insecurity were cited as secondary incentives to emigrate.

When you think about democracy, when you think about freedom of speech, when you think about your own personal freedom and security – it's much more better in America, than in Africa, you see... (Interview 22)

But economic reasons for migration are still dominant behind African migrations to the United States. The migration literature is filled with a plethora of studies delineating the importance and assessment of economic factors in explaining the reason(s) why people migrate. No matter the type of work available to them in the West, the migratory process is rationalized as offering better economic outcomes relative to what is available in Africa. Migrants stand the chance of earning relatively higher wages in the West. Holding jobs that most of them indicated they would not perform at home, many of the immigrants focus on the wage differentials between work in Africa and the West in general. A considerable number of immigrants and their families enjoy standards of living that most would not have attained if they had stayed in Africa. Economic issues dominate the formulations of the meanings of immigration. Negative experiences with discrimination and perceived denial of economic

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opportunities on account of skin color and place of origination were cited as major problems facing the immigrants in the United States. For some of the immigrants, good educational background does not easily translate into better access to economic resources and opportunities.

Despite the great potential, English knowledge and education level, the African immigrants were more likely to live in poverty in 2009 than were the native-born and the foreign-born overall. In 2009, a greater share of African immigrants lived in a household with an annual income below the federal poverty line (18.5 percent) compared to the native-born (13.6 percent) and immigrants overall (17.3 percent). Black Americans have become aware of the increasing presence of black immigrants in their communities. In Atlanta, Georgia, there has been a 284 percent increase in the African immigrant population during the past two decades. In the Midwestern cities of Minneapolis, St. Paul, the black African immigrant community grew by over 600 percent during the decade 1990–2000.

There is always that envy... you are from Africa, you're gonna take our jobs, we know why are you here. It's not only at that level, but it's even at professional level. (Interview 15)

Identification: Similarities and Distinctions

Officially, in 2008-2012, 74.4 percent of the African-born population reported their race as Black, either alone or in combination with another race. African immigrants identified as Black at a much higher rate than the native-born (14.0 percent) and the foreign-born overall (8.6 percent), and accounted for 33.3 percent of all foreign-born Blacks and 2.7 percent the total Black population in the United States. Since the voluntary migration of Africans to the United States, systematic efforts have been made by scholars of the African diaspora to unravel the contents of the relationships that African immigrants establish with other minority groups, particularly native-born black Americans. A survey of their research has revealed cultural similarities among the two groups. As a visible minority group, African immigrants share a host of common physical and cultural traits with their native-born counterparts. Like black African immigrants, African American and Caribbean-born blacks share a common bond of descent and ancestry from Africa. Their black skin color also serves as an ascribed marker of ethnic and cultural identity and membership or belongingness to the group.

There are racial minorities with similar colonial experiences when it comes to minority-majority group relationships at the national and supranational levels. A shared heritage of slavery and foreign colonisation marks the collective experiences of the two groups: African migrants and African Americans. In a race and colour-conscious American social system, African and American-born blacks continue to occupy lower social hierarchies when multiple dimensions of well-being and life chances (healthcare, income, lifespan, longevity, home ownership, access to capital, and wealth) are contrasted with white Americans. Most African Americans are still inclined to see themselves as second class citizens in their home country, a nation wherein their ancestors have always played an important role. An African American from Philadelphia spoke vividly about it –

During the 400 years of enslavement we helped to build this country. And we were not even allowed to use a bath. So that's trauma. (Interview 17)

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Another Black citizen of the City of Brotherly Love responded to the question, ‘what historical figures are most prominent for America?’ –

To me, black people who were brought here as slaves; we built America. However, everything is based on caucasians. You see all those statues [in the city], some of them are for blacks, but mostly they are for caucasians. (Interview 15)

Our field research evidences that notwithstanding common features between African migrants and African-Americans, the differences between them and misconceptions, as well misunderstandings are obvious. Many African Americans are indifferent to their African roots; some of them do not even want to associate themselves with the natives of her underdeveloped countries. Marilyn Halter (2007) noted that the history of the relationship between native and foreign-born black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean has been an uneasy one. The foreign-born blacks are said to assert their cultural differences and look to the numerous associations that they form to minimize the deleterious effects of discrimination and racism. As Halter aptly stated, the foreign-born blacks come to realize that their cultural distinctiveness does not shield them from racism and discrimination. Their black skin color marks them for discrimination and prejudice from the wider society. I do not want to generalise in such sensitive questions, but some respondents told us that attitudes towards them from African Americans were worse than from other groups in society. It could be a result of heightened expectations. As one respondent stated –

...that’s part of the cultural shock. You come, you see somebody looking like you, you think that this person might be more ... you know, for support, for help than somebody who looks different from me. But you find out that people who looks different from you are more helpful than people who looks like you. (Interview16)

I have had racial discrimination directed toward me by African Americans more than white persons did. (Interview 11)

Our respondents identified the roots of this situation with stereotypes which existed among African Americans as well among African migrants about each other. The contact between African American and modern African migrants are shadowed by stereotypes of Africans as either poor and uncivilised, or smart and arrogant. African men are also seen as domineering and African women as passive and accepting of the abuse they get at the hands of oppressive African men. African Americans are seen as lazy, obsessed with racism and lacking a culture. African American women are seen as loose, while the men are seen as violent criminals.

...in Africa there are a lot of negative stereotypes, and a lot of Africans come to America having extremely negative viewpoint or stereotypes of African Americans: that they are lazy, that they are rude, that they are ignorant, that they are poorly educated... (Interview 6)

Tanzanian born and American raised, Msia Kibona Clark pointed out that the Nigerian slang word “Akata”, which Americans were first exposed to in the film “Sugar Hill”, is a word used by some West Africans to refer to African Americans. The word, roughly translated, is a derogatory term meaning “savage”, “slaves”, “captives”, or (like in Sugar Hill) “cotton picker”. These are some of the images that tend to hover over any contact between Africans

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and African Americans (Clark, 2012). And from other side, the stereotypes which African migrants face –

...But as for African Americans in general, they think that they can learn nothing from us. They think that we live in the bush, in jungles. They have everything, and we got nothing! So if you are from a city and I am from bush, you think there's nothing you can learn from me. (Interview 4)

You also get that they think that we are undereducated; most of us live in poverty and on the trees, this all traditional stereotypes. (Interview 16)

Many people say that African Americans have a sort of grievance towards Africans. Most typical –

I even heard that some of them like to say 'You sold us', 'Our ancestors came here as slaves because your ancestors sold them'. (Interview 7)

Some respondents, NGO activists have noted that –

It's pity, but we don't have a strong African American voice on the issue of immigration. (Interview 16)

Because African Americans do not consider this an important issue, for them social problems, discrimination, equal opportunities are more significant. For misunderstanding between African migrants and African Americans our respondents blame *inter alia* American mass media. Our respondent from Somalia who is now a Canadian citizen and Boston resident stated that –

I'm a teacher and I talked to so many and had conversations and tried to find out where this little hostility comes from. And I found that they see Africans on the TV, dying from hunger and this and that, and they just don't want to associate with you. They see Africans as the poor who came here in large numbers as refugee. (Interview 20)

The image of Africa in the American media according to our respondents' views, is such that they do not make distinctions between African countries –

They never say "Liberia", they always say "Africa." All what is happening in Liberia, is happening in "Africa." Everything happening in Kenya, is "Africa." They never identify the countries, so a lot of the people here do not appreciate the fact that Africa is a continent, even though in Africa we have different cultures. But people just do get that as if we just live in one country – "Africa". (Interview 3)

The education system plays a role in the misrepresentation of Black people as a whole. One of our respondents tell us a heartbreaking story, but with a positive outcome of how African American and African migrants can come together –

When I went to work in America, to the Department of Energy, I was the only African in my unit. And the staff in the unit were all Americans – one White and the rest Black. But I come in touch with people easily, so it did not take long for

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me to make friends. Today those – the staff and I, and our families – we are very close. But I remember one day when one of them looked at me with tears in her eyes, and she said: “If you had not come into this unit, I would have never known that it was possible for me to proudly feel African.” And I said: “Why?” And she said: “Because of what we were taught at school.” She was older than the other staff. And she said: “In school, I was never taught to appreciate my heritage.” (Interview 3)

For some of the African émigrés, diaspora identity will be shaped by links with the nation-state. For others, the content of diaspora identity is going to be informed by a Pan-African dynamic. Yet still for others, the formation and continuity of diaspora identities will be filtered through immigrants’ sense of statelessness, refugee status, tribal, clan, ethnic, class, gender, or even alumni relationships. It is not merely the formation of a common African and African American diaspora that is questionable, but the existence of just one “African diaspora” is difficult to imagine. Not just one “African diaspora” was formed, instead Senegalese, Ethiopian, and other national diasporas have formed; most African respondents think the same way. These diasporas are extremely heterogeneous and internally fragmented – ethnically, religiously, socially, politically. At the same time, migrants from different states may share commonalities, including ethnicity, language and religion. There is business, friendship, and sometimes family relations between them; sometimes their members demonstrate Pan-African feelings. Nonetheless, the country of origin is the identity’s “reference point” for most first generation African migrants. They try to keep it for their children. For example, respondents from Somalia (more often) or Nigeria said they prefer marriages to people from their countries for their children.

...Ah, I’ll tell you so: yes, only Nigerians. Because of culture. That’s the only one (culture - V.U.) she knows. Because she grows with Nigerian parents, our life is Nigerian. That’s the only life she knows.

- *But you said you are typically American.*

- Not in the area of marriage. Not in the area of marriage. For me, I am American. I know she cannot cope with the American culture, she cannot live in the house with the American culture. Any house! We still live in the family with respect, they (daughters - V.U.) are humble, in all, being Nigerians. I want them to continue to do that, and in the place where we are they (Americans - V.U.) don’t proceed that. (Interview 21)

But some research says that there are more Africans married to Americans of African descent than to Americans of European descent (Clarks, 2012). Marriages between Africans and African Americans for some of respondents constitute not only new strong links between two communities, but also a new feature to identities of all Black Americans, or even challenge to identification of African Americans as well as Africans migrants to the United States.

Conclusion

What surprised or even shocked African immigrants in North America is that the peoples of black African descent are still struggling to define and redefine their identities, roles, and places in the global community. For black African immigrants, the articulation of racial identity is linked to the historical symbolisms often associated with being black. When we had a talk with our respondents, racial identity was not awarded much importance. They identified themselves as Blacks because the society identifies them in this way. Coming from

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highly diverse backgrounds in every aspect of human endeavour, the new black immigrants entering the United States add to the ethnic and racial tapestry of the United States. In particular, they transform, enrich, and broaden the African American ethnic quilt with their cultural presence. Within this plural and ethnic mosaic representing black American identities, is the notion of shared cultural essences, the varied ways in which black African culture adds to the black American racial and ethnic tapestries. Overall, contact between Africans and African Americans is often complex and multi-layered. Economic background, level of African-centered consciousness, length of time in America, age, and family influences, all play a part in the interactions between Africans and African Americans. The study demonstrates that all of these immigrants, irrespective of the modes and circumstances of their migrant journeys or what brings them to the shores of the United States, are united by a common core principle: to use migratory contacts to change how Africans as a group are viewed by the rest of the world and at the same time use the experiences they garner abroad to empower Africans. And though their absence from the African scene may continue to cause a depletion of talent and human resources, ultimately these immigrants give back to Africa more than has been invested in them by their respective home governments. And once again to make it clear: for African Americans, race is a key point of identification whereas for African migrants it is their home country, religion, ethnicity, and only after all of that, race.

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