

# “African-Australians” Identity in the Making: an Exploratory Analysis of its Imagery and Explanatory Power

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Abay Gebrekidan,

La Trobe University

## **Abstract**

This article explores the recently introduced term ‘African-Australians’ that has been commonly used to describe African migrants in Australia. The hyphenated term discursively denotes all black people of African origin as homogeneous groups. Despite criticisms by some scholars who dismiss it as inadequate and misleading, the everyday use of the word in media reports and public discourses has continued to surge. Yet little has been known about this group identity, how it emerged, its meaning and whether African migrants themselves would prefer to be identified by this collectivist identity. The purpose of this article was to investigate the meaning and explanatory power of this racialized, pan-Africanist identity. Participants’ self-categorisations and self-identifications were explored in relation to the broader label ‘African-Australians’ and against the backdrops of ethnic, or nationality backgrounds and Australian nationality. A qualitative inquiry was adopted, focusing on participants’ personal accounts and narratives. I used materials extracted from my doctoral research project among the Horn of African migrant youth living in Melbourne, Australia. Findings suggest that semantically being ‘African-Australian’ was explained as a common name for anybody who has an ‘African face’ and presumed to have originated from African continent. This was the essentialised interpretation of ‘African’ based on one’s externally visible skin colour. There was a general concordance towards the generic label ‘African-Australian’, but some participants rejected that label and preferred to be identified by their respective hyphenated ethnic, or nationality backgrounds. Overall, there was a trend towards embracing a globalised ‘Black African identity’ crafted out of the essentialised attribution of ‘Africanness’ and ‘Blackness’. ‘Africanness’ in its racialized connotation served as organising tool and unifying force the outcomes of which was expressed by the desire to institutionalising a ‘Black African culture’ in Australia.

## **Introduction**

This article has explored the recently introduced phrase ‘African-Australians’ widely used in public discourses in reference to African migrants, refugees and the Diaspora communities in Australia in general. The term has been widely used by the mass media, local organisations, the government, community associations and academicians alike to describe and refer to African-origin black people in Australia (Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010b). In Australia formal statistical recording and identifications of ethnic groups and migrants relied on such characteristics information as one’s self-perceived ethnicity, birthplace, language, ancestry and religion (Department of

Immigration and Border Protection/DIBP, 2014; ABS, 2005). On top of this formal identifications, African immigrants are also collectively known by this generic name 'African-Australians'. The term is exclusively applied to refer to sub-Saharan Africans as a whole (Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002, p. 20-21), and does not include the non-Black immigrants originating from the region of Northern Africa who are technically incorporated into the Middle East (ABS, 2008, ABS, 2005).

The hyphenated term discursively denotes all black people of African origin as homogeneous groups. However, some scholars have openly dismissed this group label 'African-Australians' as inadequate and misleading arguing that the phrase was adopted for the sake of political, bureaucratic and technical convenience "without critical attention to its relevance and impact" on the different ethno-cultural and linguistic groups (Phillips, 2011:57). In addition, critiques also argue that the umbrella term homogenises the diverse cultures, experiences and migration histories of Africans by putting them into a collective baggage full of stereotypes (Jakubowicz, 2010; Zwangobani, 2012; Ndhlovu, 2014). In view of Jakubowicz (2010) mainstream Australians tarnished the whole idea of 'African' with a 'map of stereotypes' such as disease, conflict, war, poverty and famine (2010:4). Studies show that the term 'refugee' when conjoined with 'Africa' generates higher score of negative stereotypes than when it is conjoined with other place of origin like 'Asian' (Hanson-Easey & Moloney, 2009). In their study of social representations, Hanson-Easey and Moloney observed that *refugees from Africa* characteristically received peripheral negative images such as hunger, black, disease and sadness.

Some of the impacts of indefinite generalisation and homogenisation involves an exaggerated under (or over) representations and perpetuation of negative images for all. For instance, media reports often portray Africa as a country and represented refugees and migrants from Africa as members of a single community (Windle, 2008; Reiner, 2010). Windle stated that such media representations have gone to the extent of representing the entire African migrants from a story of one ethnic group where "Sudanese is often used to cover all 'black' refugees" (Windle, 2008: 554). This practice of making generalisations by substituting one or two countries to a continent-wide label is exclusively common to African migrants. And European migrants such as Irish, Italians, Greeks or Germans are rarely defined by continental designation like "European-Australian" (Phillips, 2011). Overall, it can be said that African migrants might have some commonalities as refugees and minority groups with similar socio-economic characteristics and problems of social exclusion and discrimination, however, this does not necessarily mean that they are all the same and share the same experiences and interests. African migrants are extraordinarily diverse groups along ethnic, cultural, racial and linguistic background, professional skills and backgrounds as well as immigration histories and experiences (Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002), and hence, they have less in common with each other than others like Europeans do have (Jakubowicz, 2010, p.4).

Generalized perceptions of Africa and African migrants may stem from lack of knowledge or ignorance about the diversity of African societies, or wrongly presumed homogeneity of Africans on the basis of their physical appearance (Ndhlovu, 2014). However, it is not exactly known why this generic label is used, its implication, meaning as well as whether members of the African migrant communities themselves would like to be identified by this umbrella term 'African-Australians'. In this article, I have explored the meaning of the hyphenated phrase, its imagery and explanatory power as racialized pan-ethnic identity. The

paper draws on materials extracted from my doctoral research project among the Horn of African background young people living in Melbourne.

## Background

Before dealing with the empirical materials, it is important to provide brief background information about the causes for generalised conceptions of 'Africans' and the complexity of defining and demystifying 'Africa'. Generalizing discourses and representations of African migrants can be attributed to the broader epistemic conception of continental Africa. One of the central arguments regarding the holistic view of Africa relates to the fundamental question of how and in what context one defines 'Africa' and by extension 'African identity' (Zezeza, 2006). Insofar as collectivist interpretation is concerned, any knowledge and information about African people and African identity is questionable at practical, theoretical and analytical levels. Paul Tiyambe Zezeza (2006) offers a compelling analysis of the ontological and epistemological limitations and problematics of defining Africa. He argues that:

Africa is exceedingly difficult to define...the idea of "Africa" is a complex one with multiple genealogies and meanings, so that extrapolations of "African" culture, identity or nationality, in the singular or plural, any explorations of what makes "Africa" "African," are often quite slippery as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency. Describing and defining "Africa" and all tropes prefixed by its problematic commandments entails engaging discourses about "Africa," the paradigms and politics through which the idea of "Africa" has been constructed and consumed, and sometimes celebrated and condemned. I argue that Africa is as much as a reality as it is a construct whose boundaries—geographical, historical, cultural, and representational—have shifted according to the prevailing conceptions and configurations of global racial identities and power, and African nationalism, including pan-Africanism. (Zezeza, 2006: 14).

As Zezeza stated the complexity of defining Africa is multifaceted that permeated theoretical, historical, political and pragmatic aspects of what defines Africa and what makes Africans 'African'. However, important in understanding the idea of 'Africa' relates to the racial constructions and discourses about African identities framed by paradigms of difference along contours of colour lines that transcended national territories and cultural differences of the people. Thus, internationally the idea of being 'African' is characteristically framed by essentialist discourses of Africa as biology, geographically referred to represent the black population south of the Sahara.

Further deconstructing the etymological analysis of the word 'African' can also adequately inform us the implicitly or explicitly meanings that it bears in the everyday usage of the word. It resembles with a simple dictionary meaning. *The Macquarie Dictionary Online* has boldly defined the term *African* with direct reference to skin colour as given in the following:

*a person native to or resident in Africa, especially a member of one of the dark-skinned peoples;*  
*a person descended from one of the people of Africa, especially from one of the dark-skinned peoples.*

In Australia, the general patterns of classifying ethno-cultural groups and countries seem to have been heavily influenced by this racialized definition and perception of Africa. This can be observed in the standard classification schemes where "African" is referentially

understood to mean a black person from sub-Saharan African excluding the Arabic speaking Northern African countries and ethnic groups who are formally aligned into the Middle East region (ABS, 2005, 2008). The reason for this is that North Africans tend to be viewed as 'not African' on grounds of their race and culture and consequently listed alongside the Middle East while south of the Sahara and north-east Africans are considered somehow 'more African' (Jakubowicz, 2010, p. 13; Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002, p.7). Studies also suggest that in the global Diaspora, North African migrants originating from Arabic background North Africa do not identify themselves as 'African'. Tetey and Pupilampu (2005) observed that contemporary non-Black, African immigrants in Canada disputed their designation of "African" because for them "African" connotes "Black" and hence doesn't describe them. According to Tetey and Pupilampu the contestation and disavowal among the African-origin, non-Black immigrants is ingrained in the socially constructed negative connotation of 'Blackness'.

In his recent work *Becoming an African Diaspora in Australia*, Ndhlovu (2014) noted that in Australia, popular assumptions about the homogeneity of African migrants appears to go as follows—because they all look alike (by virtue of the colour of their skin), originate from the same continent (Africa), and are presumed to be speakers of shared 'standard' African languages, then their behaviours, their needs, their attitudes and the things they are capable (or not capable) of doing are the same (p.69). This tendency and practice of treating African migrants and refugees as homogeneous social groups is mistaken that overlooks the multitudes of cultures, ethnic and nationality groups of Africans (Reiner, 2010). Some surveys investigated issues and experiences African migrant communities and observed that generalised representation was one of the issues raised by community members. The Australian Human Rights Commission (2010a) report observed that there was a concern raised by members of African migrant communities about terminological choice of 'African-Australians' to represent the extraordinarily diverse groups of Africans in Australia. This report stated that "... there was a need to move beyond the tendency to perceive African Australians as 'homogenous' as well as promote the diversity characterising communities. This advice was taken when the research and consultation methodology was developed...the use of various terms, including the term 'African Australian' and the word 'refugees' and the need to ensure that the diversity representative of African Australian communities was adequately conveyed throughout every stage of the research..." (2010, p.18).

On the contrary, other scholars seem to be optimistic arguing for the potential and practical necessity for African migrants to be organised and come all together under one umbrella organisation (Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002). Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock proposed the concept of "African-Australian" as a favoured term and called for the establishment of an all-encompassing umbrella organisation 'African-Australian Central Agency' that would cater the needs and potential unity of Africans in Australia. They proposed that, among others, the advantage of this organisation is that it "embraces a large concern about concepts of African identity and culture, and a need to bring together the diversity of African peoples and cultures under one, stronger, central organisation" (2002, p.204). That is an ambitious plan, if not fictitious, to craft out an 'African identity and culture' out of the multitudes of societies, cultures and identities. However, it is also essential to consider practical predicaments and potential implications when one attempts to bring all Africans into a single '*continental nationality identity*' that transcends the respective nationality backgrounds and ethno-cultural affiliations. Perhaps, it is for this practical constraints that some scholars have argued that the new invention 'African-Australians' is too simplistic to capture the diversity of Africans

(Ndhlovu, 2014; Phillips, 2011), and efforts to do so might cause a ‘forced homogenisation’ (Zwangobani, 2012).

In the global Diaspora, it has become a common tradition that African migrants are homogeneously identified by continental names “African-American”, or “African-Canadian” in their respective destination countries. The primary force that binds Africans is one of biological (racial) characteristics than cultural or social similarities. In most of the cases, ‘Africanness’ is perceived in its essentialised attributes of ‘Blackness’ in which one is defined as ‘African’ principally based on her/his visible physical appearance. In the US, studies show that the term “African-Americans” was introduced by social activist Jesse Jackson in 1990s as an alternative to the previously used pejorative words “Black”, “Negro” and “people of colour” (Martin, 1991; Smith, 1992; Neal, 2001). In view of Martin (1991) and others, Jacksons’ preferences for the hyphenated identity “African-American” was to renew social solidarity of Black Americans by creating a sense of shared problems and historical injustices while at the same time reconnecting them back to their motherland Africa. The campaign for the use of this term was meant to increase racial consciousness by redefining Black in terms of pan-Africanist ethnicity. The changes and developments in lexical preferences of Black Americans reflected different sociocultural and symbolic significance for African people in the US by building a sense of solidarity and connection among each other and with their native motherland Africa. Having a collective or group identity has helped Blacks to organise and seek emancipation from exploitative systems of slavery and servitude (Smith, 1992; Neal, 2001). Each of the different terms “Negro”, “Black”, or “African American” contains a varying degrees of stereotypes held by mainstream white American population (Hall, Phillips & Townsend, 2015). In Canada immigrants from Africa are collectively known by the common identifier “African-Canadian” based on the assumption of pan-Africanist identity label (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005). However, African immigrants have not always been content with and subscribed to such broader, pan-Africanist ethnic identifications.

## **Methodology**

This article adopted qualitative inquiry, an in-depth, face-to-face interview with individual participants selected from African migrant communities in Australia. Particularly, sample participants were recruited from the Horn of African migrant background youth living in metropolitan regions and pocket suburbs of Melbourne, where the largest number of African migrant communities are concentrated. A total of eighteen respondents (M=12; F=6), aged 18 to 25 were interviewed. Participants were screened, recruited and accessed for interviews using chain-referral (or snowball) sampling method with the help of local community organisations, agents and key informants. The ethnic composition of participants consisted of 9 Ethiopians, 5 South Sudanese, 3 Eritreans, and 1 Djibouti background youth.

Participation in interviews consisted of certain criteria: that a potential participant must be between 18 to 25 years old, be from Horn of African background, and either born in Australia or come to Australia before turning 12. While few were born in Australia, majority of participants came to Australia at early age with their parents. However, all participants started schooling in Australia, and therefore, have been moulded and shaped by the Australian school systems. Those who were born outside of Australia had had refugee experiences before settling in Australia. During their stay as refugees, some have acquired local languages of the transition country and hence have become multi-lingual. In Australia,

English was their everyday language of communication, while the role of mother tongue was limited only within the family group at home and occasionally spoken at some ethno-cultural events. Languages acquired from the transition country had little importance and were dwindling. Characteristically, majority of participants displayed a blend of ancestral cultural identities toasted with the mainstream Australian values and styles. In addition, a large number of participants have made overseas trips to their ancestral country in the past two to five years.

Overall, contents of interview items probed revolved around participants' awareness and subjective understanding of the phrase 'Australian-Australians', their routine daily life activities and engagements in the broader multicultural Australian society, their social connections and sentiments of attachment to an African fellow men, how they embrace their ethnic identities, broader 'Africanness' against the backdrops of 'Australianness'.

An in-depth, informal and interactive conversation technique was applied in order to explore and delve into the life stories and experiences of participants. Interviews were conducted in English, in a convenient, open and safe places arranged in agreement with participants. Each interview session ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were digitally recording and transcribed verbatim, and set for analysis. Thematic analysis was used that involved identifying recurring themes, coding and clustering patterns. To protect confidentiality, each participant was coded as PT (to mean research *Participant*) followed by sequence number (e.g. PT5 means participant 5).

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Analysis of participants' stories and narratives shows complex outcomes about the concept of being 'African' and identified as 'African-Australian. It was defined and interpreted in a number of ways, at times acting as organising tool for unity and at the other a justification for internal group differences. According to my participants the unifying power of being 'African' principally stems from the essentialised interpretation of continental Africa, and the social position that African migrants have in Australia as minority groups. This brings the necessity to coming together collectively as one group in order to promote common needs and concerns. The hyphenated phrase embodied this issues of commonality shared by African migrants as black, minority groups in Australia. It served as unifying force knitting the diverse groups towards a common goal and concern. In this regard, participants proudly upheld and celebrated it. On the contrary, other participants challenged the logical validity of the generic name that embraced *all* black Africans in Australia. They argued that as much homogeneous racially, African immigrants encompass an extremely heterogeneous cultural, ethnic, linguistic and racial backgrounds. Majority of participants emphasised and assertively articulated their self-identifications in terms of the more narrower and immediate ethnic and nationality backgrounds, disdaining the collectivist view of 'African migrants' as homogeneous groups.

In this section, I have outlined these emerging patterns and contrasting views into four broader themes and subheadings.

### **1. 'African-Australians': its Meaning and Explanatory Power**

In the global diaspora, African refugees and migrants are often collectively identified by a continent-wide names such as African-American, or African-Canadian in the respective

destinations (Smith, 1992; Tettey & Paplampu, 2005), and ‘African-Australian’ has become an equivalent designation applied to describe black Africans living in Australia. These kinds of umbrella names can be derived either from political practices of classification introduced by the state and its bureaucratic processes, or from below in ordinary conversations, social interactions and informal ways of naming in the community as conventional practices of identification. Over time they have become a common denominator and sources of identifications for Black Africans across the global world in the way that they interpret the deymonym ‘African’ to represent all people and descendants of African.

According to the views of participants in this study the all-encompassing, pan-ethnic designation “African-Australians” is emerging as a common descriptor for all black Africans in Australia. Being ‘African-Australian’ was perceived to be a common name for anybody who has an ‘African face’ and presumed to have originated from the African continent. That was the meaning of the phrase as used by mainstream Australians. ‘African-Australian’ simply refers to someone who is dark-skinned and African descent. There was a common understanding and concordance among participants with regard to the meaning of the broader label. Many of them even categorically reported their identity as being ‘African-Australian’, although some have resisted this label arguing that logically ‘Africa’ is not a country by which one should be classified as such.

Those participants who self-categorised and self-identified as ‘African-Australian’ emphasised on the importance of coming together as group, as an African person living in Australia, and that of building an ‘African-Australian’ as common identity that binds all Black Africans in Australia. The assumptions held by these groups of young people was that in Australia the ‘African personality’ and ‘African identity’ is something automatically ascribed to *all* Black Australians of African origin by the mainstream white Australians. Participants also noted that ‘African’ was referentially defined as a core identity that would embrace all Black people emigrated from Africa. In this sense the hyphenated word connotatively refers to ‘someone who is dark-skinned, African descent and has become an Australian citizen or resident. The following comments clearly illustrate this racially inferred connotation of the hyphenated term. When asked how he identifies himself, PT5 (participant5) had to say the following:

*So, you know, I say I am African Australian but when I mean African, I am Australian, you got the sense? So identity is, the way you asked is pretty complicated. I like to say I am global citizen if there is such a thing but you know, at the moment in Australia, I say I am African Australian. What does that mean? You know, just somebody who is African descent that is born in Australia or lived here long enough to become citizen of the nation. (PT5)*

The ideal identity preference for PT5 appears to be a ‘global citizen’ that is borderless, unrestricted, transcending nationality territories. Being aware of that fictitious nature of cosmopolitan citizenship, PT5 constitutively embraced an ‘African-Australian’ identity that would offer him the advantage of greater membership into the broader global identity assigned to all black Africans— an identity category that stems from one’s ascribed membership into the black human race. This idealized membership to ‘global citizen’ was also shared by another female participant, PT3 who provided her narratives as follows:

*I identify as an Oromo living in Australia even though technically my nationality is Australian. On top of that I would identify as, in terms of my racialised identity, as a black person living in Australia and a black person also living in the global context of*

*Diaspora but not really in my immediate identification do I use the word Australian, or identify as Australian. (PT3)*

The opinion of PT3 was shared by a number of other participants. None of the participants preferred to self-identify their national allegiance as 'Australian' without a prefix to it. Similarly, another female participant, PT4 who was half-Eritrean and half-Egyptian declared 'Africanness' as the core of her identity component. She categorically describes herself as being 'African', pointing out her strong affinity to her Eritrean heritage.

*Yeah, I definitely feel more Eritrean than Egyptian because I was raised in Eritrean culture. I don't know anything about Egyptian culture really like no one, mum doesn't know Egyptian culture. So definitely, more Eritrean but yeah definitely more African, like a black African that is my main, that is the core of my identity, I feel like (PT4).*

This is a racially-inferred explanation that participants suggested about what the term 'African-Australians' means when used in the wider public discourses in Australia. Participants believed that African migrants in Australia are automatically viewed and considered as being *all* Black, and have shared experiences, history, language and cultures and hence promptly known by the hyphenated marker. This idea was also confirmed by another female participant, PT17 who highlighted on the vagueness of the label. Talking about what the term represents, she reported the following:

*I think again Africans in general have had completely different experiences and like once again like just Sudanese is a broad term, African-Australian is very broad in itself. To me it will probably just means someone who is dark skin and that lives in Australia, like that is what it is.*

In the same vein PT16 attested her opinion with regard to the formation of the new label 'African-Australians' as follows:

*It is a new term, it hasn't, like I have been hearing about it recently because there are organisations now who focus on African-Australian stuff.*

From the above transcripts we can observe that the common understanding of 'African-Australian' has gained wider usage and popularity in Australia in recent times. Some of the participants have self-affirmed their social allegiance and affiliation to the generic label. As used in everyday discourses and interactions the meaning of the collective name hinges upon the archaic assumption and equation of 'Africanness' and 'Blackness' from which racialised pan-Africanist identity is constructed (Tettey & Pupilampu, 2005). This is an extrapolated identity derived from a holistic view of continental Africa by virtue of people's physical appearances. The views of participants alludes that 'African-Australian' is connotatively associated with 'Black'. Superficially, 'African-Australian' becomes a favoured, less pejorative and alternative expression to the more racialized word 'Black', yet implicitly both terms have the same semantics. Symbolically being 'African' signifies one's racial classification, a membership to the Black population. As Zeleza (2006) stated equating Africa with geographically sub-Saharan African region discursively defines Africa as a biology, as the continent of 'black' people. Such racialized and essentialist perceptions lead to the danger of 'encoding' identities onto biological traits of skin colour pigmentation that often mistakenly equate 'Africanness' and 'Blackness' as inseparable entities regardless of what ethnic, cultural or nationality background that person possesses and belongs to.

## **2. Commonality, Mixture and the Problem of 'Othering'**

Participants reported that the phrase “African-Australians” cements a spirit of commonality among African migrants in Australia based on shared problems and experiences that they all faced as minority groups. It provides a sense of communality, social harmony and ideas of brotherhood that Africans share among each other simply because they all originated from the same continent Africa, and have common problems and interests. This was not to mean that all African immigrants and refugees are homogeneous groups in their socio-cultural makeup and composition, but rather to emphasize on those issues and problems they all encounter as minority groups in Australia. The idea of ‘Africanness’ by itself was taken as a factor to construct social solidarity based on common issues and interests by bringing together and binding all black Africans in Australia. Several participants felt that the expression “African-Australians” describes the broader, macroscopic ideological constructs of Africanity and pan-Africanism that glues all people living in or originating from continental Africa. Many of the participants articulated their affiliation and allegiance to that broader name “African-Australians”. It was an identity that emerged and constructed out of shared commonalities and characteristics. This idea of shared commonality can be revealed in the short episode below with one of the female participants, PT15 who was born to Ethiopian parents and raised in Australia:

*Interviewer: the African background people are somehow identified as one group like ‘African-Australians’. Are you aware of that term? Does it make sense for you?*

*PT15: yes, yes because the issues that Ethiopians face here are the issues that most Africans here face too. So in terms of community spirit and this kind of collective idea, yes I really like that term and probably I am very comfortable with that term because I think it encompasses a lot of the issues and a lot of the identity issues that come up with coming from migrant background. So yeah I am comfortable with that term.*

Participants also pointed out that being linked to two cultural worlds of ‘African’ and ‘Australian’ also provided the advantage of intercultural mixtures in their immediate social milieus. Participants noted that the implied assumptions and explanations of the hyphenated identity “African-Australians” reflects the condition of hybridity of cultural identities where youngsters felt incorporating identities from their African heritages and Australian experiences. Participants believed that this assemblages of identities and cultures offered them the opportunity to be more flexibility in their social interaction and communications. This idea was echoed by PT11, who assuredly claimed that the hyphenation can embrace and describe his identity as follows.

*Yeah, definitely, it describes me ‘African-Australian’, you know just having that, and I have the mixture, so definitely yeah. I have also friends that are Africans but most of their identity rule is ruled by Australian, about Australian culture, so I would identify them just as Australian, but for me I have the mixture of two, I can be African Australian... that is how I see it, having a mixture of both cultures. So being able to connect with both at whatever time you need to. So if you go to an Australian event, you will be able to fit in easily, know how to speak the language, and just know how to do the activities, the same thing with the African cultures. If you go to an African event, you know how to do, you know how to connect with the people and exactly the same thing, the same ways. (PT11)*

The above account indicates the great flexibility that young people have to disposition themselves in varying situations, dichotomously identifying themselves as ‘African’ and ‘Australian’. Similar to PT 11, many of the other participants stated that being identified by

the hyphenated word “African-Australians” provides the advantage to interact, mediate and navigate the two different social and cultural worlds of ‘African’ and ‘Australian’. Thus, as an identity category “African-Australian” stands out independently, out of the two broader clusters of ‘Australian’ and ‘African’ generic labels, underlying the other, ‘third space’ that can possibly explain the life situation of the youth as an ensemble of various cultural, behavioural, and identity characteristics and behaviour patterns.

Another significant point reported by participants relates to the reasons why they perceive ‘African Australian’ identity as more preferable category than any other naming. The underlying assumptions behind the preference of this collectivist racial identity entails priority of identity. In view of the participants, the prefix ‘African’ implies the notion of having an “African identity” first and “Australian identity” as second. It suggests structural hierarchical identification and prioritisation in the way that youngsters proclaim their self-identities. For this reason, the hyphenated phrase is preferred as an alternative identity category. The comment by one of interviewees, PT10, points out this reality who said the following:

*I like it, it is good, I like it because it is true we are Africans first, Australian second. Everybody should have something before Australia besides Aboriginals. The only people to be called ‘Australians’ are obviously Aboriginals because they are natives, you know. Like, yeah I like it, it is good name. I don’t mind if they call me African first, that is what I am, and then Australian second, I am Australia too because I live here now...even if, like I don’t know why they say that but it is true, I am African first, Australian second. But if they call me that, they have to call themselves something else like, England first, Australian second, England-Australian, you know what I am saying? Unless they are Aboriginals that is the only way I can approve right now, to be honest (PT 10).*

Partly the justification for the ranking of ‘African’ as a first priority and ‘Australian’ as a second is embedded in the contested argument of who is a ‘true Australian’. It signals a competing mindsets like what PT10 has figured out, “if they call us African-Australian, then they have to call themselves like European-Australian”. As indicated in the above comment by PT10 and other interviewees, the Aboriginals are the only people to be seen as ‘Australians’. As far as these young people is concerned all other people except the Aboriginals are immigrants and thus they should be identified by some forms of hyphenated identities. However, participants’ narratives referentially indicated ‘Australianness’ always understood with the predominant core of ‘whiteness’, namely the Anglo-Saxon or Europeans and all other migrants implicitly relegated to hyphenated ethnic identities. As such none of the young people preferred ‘Australian’ as their first identity category although they admittedly recognised and stated their national identity is ‘Australian’. When it comes to the subjective disposition and preference, “Australian” identity is merely perceived as citizenship status. Without any decomposition into subcategory such as nationality, ethnic or subethnic levels “African” always comes a first prioritised identity.

It was also clear from the data that one of the problems associated with the hyphenated identification was a sense of incomplete acceptance, or what is known as ‘divided loyalty’. Participants’ narratives highlighted this reality of what is known as ‘divided loyalty’ because it makes them to be less than the ‘full Australian’. This perception of ‘divided loyalty’ has been explicitly illustrated by one of the interviewees as follows:

*I guess it can describe me but at the same time it won't make me 100 percent Australian, not 100 percent but it won't make me accepted or whatever as to what is happening, it won't make me fully like everybody else. So if they say 'you are African Australian', that is how I will be seen 'African Australian', not 'Australian', you know what I mean? So it can be good and it can be bad...for example, bad as in not seen as equal, you know what I mean? Like I am not equal as everybody else; and good as in, you know, I can still hold on my culture and my heritage. So I can have that will to say 'yes I am African', 'yes I am Australian' together (PT12).*

One of the criticisms against the adoption of hyphenated identities such as "African-Australian", or other variants "African-American", or "African-Canadian" relates to the inherent problem of *divided loyalty* imbued in such hyphenations. In the US, hyphenated ethnic identities such as "African-American" has traditionally been regarded as 'symbols of divided loyalties' in which groups are seen at best as less than 100 percent Americans, or at worst as traitors to their adopted homeland (Thernstrom, 1980 cited in Smith, 1992). In addition, Smith (1992) also suggested that such hyphenations as "African-American" may stimulate white racists to urge that Blacks be sent back to Africa. Likewise, research among the *African-Canadians* in Canada indicates that one of the effects of hyphenated labels was perpetuating a social status of *eternal immigrant* (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005, p.41) whereby African migrants were hardly seen as 'real' Canadians by the mainstream society. Instead, they were viewed by the mainstream Canadian public as temporary residents or *over stayers* who were sought to 'go back' to where they came from. This is the prospective impact of hyphenated identities whereby minority groups are purportedly taken as *always* immigrants and at worst *second class citizens*, and thus systematically excluded, Othered and discriminated from being a full member of the mainstream Australian society. This prospective effect was poignantly stated by PT14 who questions the very purpose of hyphenations as follows:

*African-Australian? It means a second migrant, basically a second citizen, you know you are not the first that is what it means to me. Yes I am proud to be African, I am proud of my ethnic group, I am proud to be Black, but I know this country is not meant, you know. I am just here to dwell basically, that is how I feel, it could be different for other people obviously. Obviously, if you are Black, you are always African-Australian. For example, we have African-Americans, they are not called Americans; they are called African-Americans why? Because they come from Africa, you know, that is how it is.*

The same comment was reiterated by another interviewee, PT9, who alluded that it is unlikely for an African background person to be considered as 'Australian' beyond that paper-value citizenship. He mentioned the case of Black Africans in America are still identified with their African origin even though they lived for hundreds of years there. He believed that it is unlikely that Black Africans in Australia will also been seen as 'Australian'.

*I think in my opinion being like Australian-Ethiopian is for people born here and their identity is Ethiopian but like even if you are born you can't be Ethiopian-Australian, it is hard, like let's say African-Americans, they have been there like for hundreds of years, they are still like, they are not American, they are called African-American, because their background is Africa.*

Therefore, the hyphenated term 'African-Australian' has the great advantage of forging social solidarity, spirit of community and cultural unity among the black population in Australia by fostering an 'African identity' embedded in commonality of 'Blackness' and 'Africanness'. However, participants have also pointed out that in the long run being defined and labelled as 'African-Australian' also contributes negatively towards problem of being seen an *eternal immigrant* (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005, p.41) that in effect also means perpetuating the problem of 'Othering'. Previous studies have shown that in Australia "blackness is associated with a refugee status and being an outsider" (Hatoss, 2012, p.65). As a result, Australians of African descent are hardly considered as full members of Australian national by virtue of their sociocultural and racial background sociocultural background (Ndhlovu, 2014).

### 3. "They Don't have to Say Black": Resistance to the Racialized Label

Conventional representations of names and naming involve an act of political practice that entails a significant power and imagery (Martin, 1991). As a racial label the term 'Black' imaginatively carries a controversial meaning that potentially implies positive as well as negative connotations. Not surprisingly, none of the respondents apparently viewed the term "Black" as having a positive understanding in Australia although many of them admittedly reported that they are proud of their skin colour. Participants reported that as used in Australia, 'Black' has connotatively pejorative meanings that signifies negative commentaries. As a result, 'Black' was not a preferred term for the youngsters and should not be used for identification purposes as a way of naming African people because it has an explicit or implicit prejudices and racist intonations. 'Black' was generally considered by participants as outmoded word and should not be used to identify Africans. This idea was explicitly illustrated by one of the participants, PT10, in the follows conversation:

*Interviewer: how about 'Black African' term, they call sometimes like 'Black African'?*

*PT10: they call us 'Black African'?*

*Interviewer: yes. How about that kind of term? That term itself?*

*PT10: they don't have to say 'Black'. If they just say 'African-Australian' that is cool. If they say 'Black African Australian' then they are trying to be racist.*

Overall, the view of the participants is that the term 'African-Australian' is more preferred to the colour specific 'Black' because the former is more lucid, smooth, and less pejorative expression. This idea was pointed out by one of the female participants as follows:

*They don't use 'Black' now, it is considered racist; but they just say 'African'. I think it is a way of saying 'Black', 'African' is a way of saying you are 'Black Australian'. I think that is what it means and sometimes I feel that is what they are saying but it is a lot nicer to say 'African' than saying 'Black Australian', a kind of an insult when someone says 'Black Australian', they shouldn't identify them with the colour (PT13)*

The above comments suggest that at surface level "African-Australian" denotes a more neutral and simpler designation that doesn't symbolically and explicitly imply racist intonations. However, the deep-seated meaning of the word is the same as saying "Black". Hence, rather than the more explicit, outmoded naming "Black" that pejoratively shows racist intent, 'African Australian' appears to be preferred label with little racist intent and negative images. In America, recent studies show that the term "Black" bears more negative

stereotypes than the hyphenated word “African-Americans”. According to Hall, Phillips & Townsend (2015), ‘Black’ was more associated with negative stereotypes and discriminations than the more lucid phrase “African-American”. Being identified as ‘Black’ signalled more negative stereotypes, higher discrimination and a lower social class and economic position whereas “African American’ reflected comparatively better social status, less emotional tones and stereotypes than the racial label “black’. As Neal (2001) put it, metaphorically this naming was used to constitute a reality relevant to the group’s material, political or cultural conditions of the time.

In another instance, participants pointed out the conceptual and logical limitations of the term “African-Australians” as collective identity label. Some of the participants explicitly rejected this generic name arguing that its epistemological ground is flawed. They reported that ‘Africa’ is a continent, not a country by which someone can be identified. It is meaningless to identify someone as ‘African-Australian’ because it doesn’t tell about the cultural, racial, ethnic, or nationality background and affiliation of people. For this reason participants preferred a more specific ethnic or nationality identity marker like “Ethiopian-Australian”, “South Sudanese Australian” etc. that shows their genuine social identity categories and ancestral origins. Using these ethnic-based hyphenations shows all the family histories, cultural norms, traditions, routine practices and systems of beliefs and affiliations that define and embody their social identities and relationships. For all these immediate practical and social needs, participants preferred to stick to their ethnic identities. A practical example for this was statements like “yeah I am Black but my culture is not African” (PT16). In the following transcripts, PT13 and PT16 plainly illustrated the meaninglessness of using the broader label “African-Australians” as identity marker.

*Interviewer: what do you feel about this term ‘African-Australian’, do you think it can describe you?*

*PT13: it doesn’t make sense to me but I don’t know, for some reason I have learned to accept that, I donk know why because it should be like Africa is a big continent, so it is not a country someone should have been classified as African. It should be classified with their country, they identify us as one .... I don’t think it is fair, but I don’t know. But then again it would be very, because some people can’t identify if they see me, they can’t identify the country where I am from, so it is better for them to say ‘African Australian’. Most people even don’t know the countries in Africa. They know Africa, so they would just say ‘African Australian’ because they know Africa. I would definitely love to be identified as ‘Ethiopian-Australian’ because that is my country.*

*PT16: No I am not an African-Australian, I am Ethiopian-Australian like Africa, as I said before, it is not a country, like yeah I am Black but my culture is not African because Africa has many cultures, even Ethiopia has many cultures. So like it can describe me but it can’t really, really describe me because it is not me. I am not even like I am Australian citizen but yeah, I don’t think it can describe me, you can use it but it doesn’t describe Africans, African-Australian, it doesn’t, I don’t think.*

From the above comments we can observe that as a collective name ‘African-Australian’ by itself is inadequate concept to bring together the diverse ethnic groups on the basis of some form of common cultural values and traditions. As a universal racial identity specifically attuned to all Africans, “Blackness” has more unifying power binding the African youth than “African-Australian”. However, participants noted that they have learned to leniently accept

that of being 'African' and reorient themselves accordingly because the mainstream Australians do not know about Africa and the different countries in it, and thus simply use the term 'African'. Participants become reoriented towards the new identity of being 'African' and gradually accept it leniently without much thought and concern. Therefore, the participants' narratives suggest that the idea of being 'African' or more broadly 'African-Australian' is something that is arbitrarily attributed to them by others. PT17 explained the arbitrary assumptions held by the members of the mainstream society about the aggregated views of African migrants as follows:

*maybe I think other people would perceive me as African-Australian but I wouldn't perceive myself as African-Australian because a lot of people have the mindset say an American and I tell them, 'okay I am Sudanese who lives in Australia' and they are like 'oh you're African-Australian' because they think Africa is one big country, whereas I know that even within Sudan we have different like the ways of life and experiences, so they probably say that I am African Australian, that is it; and I say 'No, I am Sudanese Australian (PT17)*

However, in terms of individual preference, majority of participants reported that they would like to be identified by the more elaborate, ethnic or nationality background hyphenations such as "Ethiopian-Australian", "South Sudanese- Australian" and so on. In fact, this form of ethnic identity satisfies an immediate psychological and socio-cultural needs of participants in their daily life by embracing their authentic identity, social relationships and group memberships.

#### **4. Towards Institutionalising 'Black African Culture' in Australia**

Another theme that was evident from the interview materials was the issue of building a 'Black African culture' in Australia. That was part of the process and a reflection of the need to strengthening intergroup interactions and relationships among the diverse ethnic groups. Some of the participants gave an insight into the importance of this "Black African culture" in Australia to represent the life situations and experiences of African migrants and the black Diaspora communities in general. Apparently, the kind of 'African culture' that participants sought and aspired to establish is massively influenced by and draws parallelism from the global "Black culture", particularly African American culture in the US. There was an obvious attraction and appreciation of the global 'Black subculture'. Regarding this enthusiasm to forming and institutionalising 'Black African culture', PT3 provided her thoughts as follows:

*Black people in Australia, Black Africans specifically in Australians, its gonna take a long, long time before we establish or we cultivate some kind of Black African culture that is ours, that is not something that is just middle ground between Australian and African ethnic identity but something that is substantial, you know, like something not similar to but I guess the idea comes from African-American, or Afro-European, or Afro-Peruvian or Afro-Latino these cultures that are actually developed over time. We haven't been here very long to do that (PT3)*

The comments by PT3 highlight that the process of forming a 'Black African culture' in Australia would be very slow due to the fact that African migrants are new addition to the mainstream Australian society. Obviously the Black youth cultures in the US and elsewhere have huge impacts on the lifestyles of the youngsters and aspirations to seeing similar cultural trends being formed in Australia. However, participants also reported that the type

of 'Black African culture' in Australia should not be a direct copy from the US or somewhere else instead it has to be adaptive to the local context in order to meet the needs and lifestyles of Africans in Australia. Earlier study among African background migrant youth in Canberra observed similar trend of establishing a pan-African youth culture (Zwangobani, 2008). Zwangobani stated that the influence of pan-Africanism, diaspora and national identities have big role in framing and shaping this emerging African Australian youth subculture. The young people have the desire to create a Black African subculture that reflects their own identity and culture in the multicultural spaces in Australia. The impact of Black American youth subcultures in the lifestyle of the youngsters can be witnessed in the high preferences and selective consumptions of Black American musical genres. A large number of participants reported Black musical genres such as hip-hop, R&B, reggae, trap and soul music as their favourite sound tracks because these music contain powerful messages that unite and bring all Africans together. The following excerpts from two of the female participants, PT3 and PT4 illustrate this idea:

*I like the old school hip-hops because of the message it has, and I love also old school soul, and old boys about 60s through to the 80s. I just like the messages that they give and the way that music was sent around to different struggles, and the way that they expressed it differently, like soul is different to rap or hip-hop. They are all kind of trying to do something with it rather than mainstream music. I feel like music serves a high purpose in things like hip-hop, and soul (PT4).*

*I listen mostly to R&B especially like more 90s R&B, a lot of hip pop, I am a huge hip pop fan. I love reggae music, and this is all a lot to do with also the fact that I am part of the Black global diaspora as well. And the fact is a lot of that is influenced by African American culture, so a lot of the musicians I listen to are African Americans. I am really into also like a lot of the music that is coming out of London as well or England or the Afro-community there, the Black community there (PT3).*

There was a clear indication that participants were attracted to the messages of the Black pop cultures, sound mixes and musical genres originating from the US. Overall several factors can be accounted for this high inspiration and attraction into the African-American pop cultures and traditions. On top of personalised tastes and flavours, participants wanted to show their cultural solidarity and allegiance to the global Black youth subcultures. PT9 powerfully explains how he became so obsessed to hip hop music genres as follows:

*My choice is Hip-hop music, I am addicted to hip-hop music because I listen to hip-hop every day actually. Hip-hop is my everyday music. I think the reason why I am addicted to hip hop music is that you know a lot of hip hop music artists are Black because if you are Black, you follow your like background. So I think that is why I am addicted to hip hop (PT9).*

From this we can understand that participants' preference and subscription to the Black American pop cultures, particularly the music genres served both as a way of appreciation, promotion, support as well as strengthening affiliation to the 'Black African youth cultures' around the world. Based on this ideas of Black African youth cultures, participants would like to establish a 'Black African culture' in Australia that distinctively fits their local needs, contexts, histories, cultures and life styles of Africans in Australia. It is a kind of cultural reproduction project that aspires to forge cultural diversity and racial uniformity of Africans

in Australia. Part of this process of 'African-Australian' pop culture production has already shown significant steps and progress by some self-initiated young African pioneers (Zwangobani, 2008; Hendrie, 2011). As journalist Doug Hendrie (2011) wrote an African-Australian rappers and artists have emerged and gained wider social recognition and popularity by bringing in an African-approach to the Australian hip-hop cultures. He mentioned the Melbourne-based grassroots organisations like Diafrix and the roles they have played by mentoring these emerging African teens in this production the hip hop culture. Hendrie quoted one of the African-Australian rappers as saying "for younger Africans ...usually hip-hop is something that belongs to them — it's how black people are meant to look in the Western world. But that can be very damaging if they listen to disrespectful hip-hop." (p.1). Therefore, an American style yet distinct Black African culture continues to develop in Australia with young people adopting and reproducing it into Australian context. Zwangobani (2008) stated that black American hip hop culture has particularly great influence in shaping the emerging black African culture in Australia. Zwangobani mentioned a Canberra-based local community arts organisation called *Kulture Break* as indication of this emerging trend of 'black African culture' in Australia. Similarly, studies also show that other minority youth groups have also been influenced by the American style pop genres and youth subcultures. According to Bucher & Thomas (2001), Middle Eastern and Asian minority youth groups in Western Sydney showed that Black American pop culture has a huge influence in the cultural lifestyles and musical tastes of the youth. A mix of American style hip hops, R&B and traditional sound tracks were most preferred musical categories for these minority youth groups.

One important point that should be noted —historically musical genres and Black pop cultures in the US reflected the past exploitations, oppression, economic hardship and social injustices that African slaves had suffered from during colonial America. To a great extent the black art and musical genres in USA reflected the subordination, exploitation and degrading life experiences that African slaves have gone through. The history and experiences of the Black Africans in Australia have totally different life experiences and histories. Most of them came to Australia as refugees or humanitarian entrants due to political and social instabilities and conflicts in their country of origin in Africa.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the emerging terminological label "African-Australians" commonly used in reference to black African migrants in Australia. Conceptual and empirical materials show that the continental designation has been imaginatively constructed along the essentialised homogenisation of Africa and presumed uniformity of the diverse ethnic and racial groups of Africans at large. Participants asserted that the phrase has broader applications that encompassed all black immigrants and refugees originated from Africa.

Although participants were proudly aware and self-identified as being Black and Australian of African descent neither the pan-Africanist designation nor the more pronounced racial epithet 'Black' was favoured descriptor. Majority of participants objected the term 'Black' and say it in its pejorative meaning, particularly when used by white Australians. However, there was a general concordance towards the alternative label 'African-Australians' as opposed to 'Black'. At the immediate disposal of personal self-identifications and self-

categorisations, participants gave priority and preference to the more articulate ethnic or subethnic identity allegiances such as 'Ethiopian-Australian', 'South Sudanese-Australian', etc. These narrower hyphenations were preferred in order to maintain ethno-cultural, linguistic, ancestral roots and identities by bridging and assimilating with the life experiences in Australia. For this immediate, personal consumptions and preservation of one's roots and identities, the all-inclusive continental designation "African-Australian" has minimal role and significance. Therefore, there was a tendency to downplay the broader group identification that lumped up all African migrants as homogeneous groups

However, at the other side, participants also promoted and encouraged the idea of common African identity and a sense of unity and oneness among each other as 'Africans'. As a tool of mediating cross-cultural and transnational realities and building social solidarity, harmony and unity among the minority black Africans in Australia, participants accepted the alternative, pan-ethnic subtype "African-Australians". The unifying power of being 'African' principally stems from the essentialised understanding of continental Africa, and the minority and disadvantaged social position that African migrants occupy in the wider Australian society. This acceptance was also influenced by the equivalent continental designations across the globe such as "African-Americans" and "African-Canadians" used in reference to black African immigrants in the global Diaspora.

Participants also pointed out the marginalising effects of being collectively identified as 'African-Australians'. They pointed out the problem of being seen as *always* as migrant and a second class citizen. In view of the participants, it is unlikely for an African background person to be considered as a genuine 'Australian' beyond that paper-value citizenship. This affects the sense of belonging of the youngsters as full members of Australian. Therefore, generalized labels do not only have homogenizing effects by reconstructing, creating and sustaining forged uniformity and commonality but also have negative outcomes of marginalisation and othering.

In conclusion, the recently adopted pan-ethnic label is certainly an identity in the making. Yet further research is required, perhaps with larger samples covering a range of ethnic groups, in order to determine its appropriateness and impacts on the inclusion and/or marginalisation of Australians of African descent.

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