

African Women in Alberta on Identity and Homelands

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ABSTRACT

The imagining of homeland is an important anchor for members of diasporic communities. Transnationalism and deterritorialization, however, threaten to trouble claims to a "natural" identity grounded in a specific locale and homeland. These issues of identity formation and homeland are particularly intriguing for women whose responsibilities including enculturating children require them to model what they deem as culturally-appropriate behaviour as a means of shoring up the borders between us—in this instance an "African identity" — and the Other represented as "Canadian society." This presentation examines the ways in which first generation African women in the Canadian province of Alberta negotiate identities in the context of their families, ethnic communities, Pan-African associations and Canadian society. For many, the location of their final resting place symbolizes their struggle over their identification of home and ultimately—who they are.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, women have been regarded as adjunct to male migration in the scholarly literature (Boyle and Halfacree 1999); however, in recent decades the experiences of women crossing borders and boundaries have been illuminated by an increasing amount of research and promoted by the efforts of the Metropolis Network (see Spitzer, Anderson and Meadows 2002). Given the ever-changing landscape of immigration across the globe, however, further explorations are always required. For instance, we are currently witnessing a new African diaspora wherein émigrés are propelled by economic, political and social disorder to leave their homelands and are drawn abroad to pursue educational and economic opportunities. Currently Canada has been a preferred destination by African refugees and immigrants who perceive Canadian society as not only a safe haven, but as a society that is welcoming of cultural diversity.

In 2002, slightly over 46,000 immigrants, 20% of the total, and 9,000 refugees, 34% of the total, came from Africa or the Middle East (CIC 2004). According to 1996 statistics, the Province of Alberta was home to over 18,000 residents who were born in the African continent (Lamba, Mulder and Wilkinson 2000). Overall, 58.5% of African migrants in Alberta have completed post-secondary education (tying with the cohort from the U.S. for the status as the best-educated group of migrants in the province) and only

19.7%, did not attend high school (the lowest percentage among all groups) (Lamba, Mulder and Wilkinson 2000). The educational standing of African transnationals, however, has not translated into commensurate professional or economic status. Although 79% are employed full-time, the average wages of immigrants, in particular immigrant women, remain lower than for all those who are Canadian-born. Thus of 6,048 African women surveyed in Alberta, 41.1% are employed in the service sector, 18.5% in business, finance or administration, 9.3% in processing, manufacturing and 8.3% in health (Lamba, Mulder and Wilkinson 2000).

African women's struggles with economic and social challenges are contextualized by the forces of global restructuring that have contributed to the movement of people and capital across multiple borders, but also to the erosion of wages and conditions for women's work and the entrenchment of a colour coded hierarchy that locates a disproportionate number of women of colour in the lowest echelons (Armstrong 1996; Gabriel 1999). These shifts in economic and professional standing, familial and friendship networks, and cultural and religious milieu have the potential to cause upheavals in one's identity and sense of belonging. Thus identities can become increasingly transnational and de-territorialized as people try to locate commonalities in this shifting landscape. Immigrants and refugees, therefore, engage in multiple identities that allow them to ally with or resist various values and

meanings as they emerge in unstable and disparate contexts (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992). This flexibility, however, has its limits. Especially in a pluralist society, there are both demands and desires, to situate cultural identity around attachments that render others outside these boundaries (Hall 1996). These issues of identity formation are particularly intriguing for women whose responsibility to enculturate children require them to model what they deem as culturally-appropriate behaviour as a means of shoring up the borders between us—in this instance an “African identity”— and the Other represented as “Canadian society” (Spitzer, et al. 2003; Wilson and Frederikson 1995). Our interest in learning about the ways in which women not only occupy different subject locations at different moments (Ong 1995), but how women choose to present themselves and structure these identities has led to the research project we discuss today.

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The purpose of our study has been to examine the experiences of African women in Alberta by highlighting their changing sense of cultural identity with respect to their sense of community, homeland and Canadian society over time; to explore how women draw on notions of identity and human agency to build networks of social support; to illuminate how perceptions of identity are implicated in community-based activism; and to uncover how the translation of these local forms of organizing into building economic, social and

activist linkages beyond Canadian borders. To illuminate these issues we have hosted focus groups with African Canadian women across the Province, and interviewed African Canadian women regarded as leaders in their community. A survey is currently being assembled that will allow us to hear from more informants than has been possible using qualitative methods. This presentation focuses on the results of five focus group discussions and offers a preliminary analysis into some of the issues relating to identity formation, gender roles and home. Forty-two women participated in groups organized around region, Horn of Africa, Southern and Eastern Africa, West Africa, Francophone Africa and age, youth.

FINDINGS

Responses to our queries in many ways reflect the diversity of the continent of Africa. For instance, for many of our informants from the relatively homogenous Horn of Africa, questions of identity emerged alongside their extraction from their homeland. As Farah,¹ a Somali, explained:

The policemen are Somalis, every government official is Somali, and everyone speaks with you in Somali, so you are like brothers and sisters. People have equal rights regardless of when you went to that country. But when I am here, I always feel like a second-class citizen even if I have papers confirming my citizenship.

At home Somali-ness flowed uninterrupted through relationships, architecture, politics and behaviour; thus the Somali identity that enveloped and constituted the

¹ All informant names are pseudonyms.

landscape was not contrasted by any other cultural influences. The perceived homogeneity of Somali society is distinguished from the experiences of other informants.

For example, Maxine said:

I always say to myself that I am Mauritian because it's my identity. To me, being Mauritian stands for being francophone. Being born and raised in a diversified culture (Indian, Chinese, French and English). . . . I brought along with me a rich cultural background that really helped me deal with Canadian society.

The majority of informants, however, noted that in their homelands their identities were grounded both in family and country of origin. A minority felt that they perceived themselves as Africans, as Black, or as Black Africans.

Overall, re-location to Canada shifted the potential points of connection with geographic, linguistic and race labels due to both changing sources of social support and social networks, and to the response of Euro-Canadians. Numerous informants shared stories about meeting other Africans when they first settled in Canada who went out of their way to reach out to them despite linguistic and cultural barriers. From strangers who offered a mother struggling with groceries and her children a ride to those who simply offered a warm smile and "hello" when passing on the street. These encounters were reported as evidence of African-ness—characterized by warm, welcoming hearts and good manners that contrasted obliquely with the restraint or perceived coldness of Euro-Canadian society.

Religious affiliation offered another identity that provided a bridge to a wider array of people than those from a shared homeland. Using terms such as black Christian, African Moslem or Arab Moslem, informants situated themselves within communities whose boundaries could overlap and/or dissect geographical, cultural and religious borders.

Language provided Francophone African women from countries ranging from Tunisia, Congo, Rwanda, and Mauritius with an additional subjectivity that was unavailable to Anglophone or allophone Africans. Most echoed Jordan's sentiments about her sense of belonging in Canada: "First I see myself as a Congolese; therefore, as part of the Congolese community. Second, as part of the Francophone community."

The construction of identity labels and subjectivities can be mutually constituted. Thus the response of Euro-Canadian society had an enormous influence on shaping informants' identities. Fatima said: "The more we are discriminated against, the more the African-ness becomes obvious."

Fatma shared:

When we were in Somalia we were never grouped among other Africans but when we came here we were put into the category of Africans because of our skin colour. When I was in Somalia, I was not considered as a black person, I was always referred to as the brown lady. But here all people from Africa are black.

Ladan, another Somali, went on to say:

I never used to think there is any relation between blacks or all Africans, but when I came

here I realized I am an African. And again realized that I am not different from other Africans and blacks. I was reminded about my black identity by Canadian society.

While many of the informants from the Horn of Africa were surprised to find themselves categorized as black or African, most of the other participants from Sub-Saharan Africa were more inclined to identify with these labels in their homelands. The deployment, however, of a black identity label in Canada—and perhaps to a lesser degree to an African one—is differently charged than in an African setting. The relegation of all dark skinned individuals to a singular category, “black,” was for some a source of solidarity. Yet others were uncomfortable with the homogenization implicit in the imposition of this label that lumped together African Americans who had resided in the United States since the slave trade and indigenous Blacks in Atlantic Canada with recent migrants from the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa. Linzi is from South Africa:

I have always identified myself as a black person. But I have become more conscious of being African once I was here in Canada . . . The black identity was universal one, everybody who walks in the street looks at me and says “you are . . . black; they won’t say African.” . . . But it was the Black Caribbean population and Black American who made me feel I will say I am African in spite of being Black. . . .They think they [are] different from me, and I’ve got to be proud of my identity that makes me feel different.

In Canada, however, some found that other identities were denied. For instance, Jambo came to Canada from Malawi.

Although she saw herself as a student, she recounted, "everybody just looks at you as a black."

Changing gender roles further complicate subjectivity formation. Truncated familial networks and economic marginalization have often altered patterns of domestic labour and employment. Women who could rely on servants or kin to assist in household activities at home have been compelled to assume responsibility for cooking and cleaning. Additionally, spousal underemployment or unemployment, and single motherhood have driven some women who would have remained housewives at home to participate in paid labour resulting in a reallocation of domestic duties.

Manju, a Malawian, said:

For most of us when we come, our roles are very well defined. This is what you do as a housewife or a mother and so on. Although most of us, when we are home, we are working. It doesn't mean the man is the bread-winner and you are the supporter, but you know everybody is bringing in money, but at the same time the woman has her own work at home and the husband has something else to do, not necessarily home or anything but something else to do . . . the men do change too. They do take on more responsibilities in terms of looking after the children, cooking, some of them will say that they have never cook in their life, but now they are cooking. . . That's something's they would never have done at home. some of the some of them are actually proud, you know, because they say... I can't wait for when I go back home so that I can show you that I'm the man in the house. And sometimes, it brings a lot of conflict, a lot of problems between families and so on.

As Manju alludes, the re-negotiation of these roles has contributed to an increase in marital conflict and sometimes divorce as well as a loss of treasured time with children in the eyes of some informants. Enacting what are viewed as

appropriate African gender roles is also seen as vital to the enculturation of the next generation and the continuity of cultural identity and affiliation (Okeke-Ihejirika and Spitzer in press). Women can thus be thrust into a dilemma wherein they choose or are encouraged to re-create traditional roles to model behaviour to their children at what might be economic and social costs in Canada or to participate in the labour market and either continue to assume all domestic responsibilities or attempt to share this labour. Notably, these alterations challenge the very meaning of being African. Linzi recounts an incident when she and her husband were visiting relatives in South Africa when he deigned to wash dishes after a meal:

My cousins [asked], "How can he go into the kitchen and help?" But he fought for himself and said, "After eating I'm not going to sit there wasting my energy. I'm going to wash these dishes." They had a problem with that. They think, "Oh, your husband cooks, you don't know how to cook." So they are always challenging me. When I go home to visit somebody, they want me to cook to prove that I can cook.

For Linzi experiences like these during her visits to South Africa have altered her identification of home where she says, "I feel like a stranger. I prefer now to die in Canada and be buried in Canada." Her sentiments are echoed by Almaz, among others, who surprised herself during a visit to Eritrea, the land of her birth, when she said she was going home—and meant Canada. Almost an equal number of informants, however, still envisioned a return to the place they were born suggesting that imagining home and one's

final resting place remain contested and in part may be contingent on their ability, politically or economically, to have made a return visit.

CONCLUSION

The presumption that persons can draw upon a "natural" identity grounded in a particular locale has been disrupted by an interrogation of the contested and imagined claims to place and community (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a). Our preliminary investigation into the ways in which African women in Alberta negotiate their identities suggests that migration has offered women a wider palette of identities upon which to draw. Depending upon the context, women have the ability to assume more inclusive identity categories such as African, Francophone, Christian or black, that can offer greater ballast from the potential onslaught of Euro-Canadian society that can erode identity, self-hood and self-esteem.

Additionally, the imagining of home and homeland is an important anchor in particular for diasporic peoples (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b). In this study, we find the location of home in flux; informed not as we might have imagined by the location of children or refugee or immigration status, but the experience of feeling Other in the place that had once provided the grounding of place. While we will elaborate upon the relationship of these identities to transnational processes in future presentations, the political and

economic forces that shape and circumscribe these subjectivities and imaginings of home cannot be ignored.

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