

African Cultural Education: A dialogue with African migrant youth in Western Australia.

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work, which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Abstract

‘African Cultural Education: A dialogue with African migrant youth in Western Australia’, examines cultural issues that concern a specific group of African migrant youths. The ten youth participants three of whom are male and seven female share their concerns and desires about issues relating to their cultural identity. As a minority group in a predominantly Eurocentric society they are faced with cultural challenges, which influence their being namely: Racism and the pressure to assimilate.

The thesis adopts an Afrikan¹ Centred Cultural Democracy approach: which proposes that African people must construct a ‘new’ African identity and must begin to perceive and interpret the world in its entirety from an African psychological, spiritual, and cultural frame of reference. This approach requires an ongoing critical assessment of both subjective lived experience and objective conditions. Through the Ujamaa circle process the youth participants along with the facilitator examined challenges to their cultural identities and alternative liberatory options. Growing up in a culturally alienating Eurocentric culture, they felt the need for an African cultural space, in which they could explore issues affecting them as African descendants. In particular racism and assimilation were of major concern to them. They were of the opinion that there should be an ongoing African Cultural Education Program to facilitate cultural re-evaluation and continuity.

It is the study’s conclusion that cultural education for a minority African migrant group in a dominant Eurocentric culture is essential for their identities and continued root-cultural connectedness. Within the African Cultural Education conceptual framework, in addition to African cultural re-evaluation, it is possible to critically explore oppressive and domineering practices of the mainstream culture. It is also possible that the African migrant youth may become equipped with alternative worldviews from an African perspective, which will enable him/her to make informed judgement and response towards

¹ Afrikan is used when referring to Dr. Akinyela’s cultural democracy theory.

inappropriate mainstream attitudes and values. Participation in the arena of cultural politics will therefore be based on informed practice.

Acknowledgements and Dedications

This thesis would not have been possible without the African migrant youths who shared their stories during the Ujamaa Circle process. My thanks to you all.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents: my dad the Late Dasani Were and mum F. Namusobya Were. Dad had a large collection of books in his living room, which he encouraged me to read. In those days to own a home library in a village seemed odd and out of place. Mum on the other hand told me folk stories about our ancestors and also taught me to sing and dance. Through this type of environment my values and humanity were developed and established. I therefore grew up with two forms of education: the formal through school and the informal through the home library and my mother's evening cultural classes. Thank you for being good parents.

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Preface

The tragedy of the Negro in America is that he has rejected his origins — the essentially human meaning implicit in the heritage of slavery, prolonged suffering, and social rejection. By rejecting this unique group experience and favouring assimilation and even biological amalgamation, he thus denies himself the creative possibilities inherent in it and in his folk culture. This “dilemma” is fundamental: it severely limits his ability to evolve a new identity or a meaningful synthesis, capable of endowing his life with meaning and purpose.

(E. U. Essien-Udom, 1962, p.vii)

Do African migrants in Australia face the same risk, of living in self-denial, as noted by Essien-Udom of the African-Americans? Having arrived in Australia in 1991 with a relatively young family, my wife and three children missed Africa dearly. With all the relatives and village spirit missing in our new place of settlement we felt that our children were destined to be something miserably different. In our new place of settlement everyone was an individual. At the time of our resettlement, in Australia, the images of famine and wars in Africa were quite frequent in the Australian media. The forty-hour famine, fundraising campaigns by organisations such as World Vision displayed images of starving Africans in schools where our children attended. This became irritably disturbing for us as parents of African migrant background. The psychological humiliation of being African was obvious and we were not sure of what impact it would have on our children. Consequently we resolved to focus on teaching our children the positive aspects of African culture and being. We sang beautiful songs of Africa and told them stories about their ancestral heritage. The more we did this the more confident our children became. As our children became older we taught them to play musical instruments and other aspects of African culture. Occasionally when we had time we performed in festivals with our children. We believe that Africa is a beautiful continent and that its people and cultures are also beautiful. Through our initiatives our children therefore have learnt an alternative reality about Africa to that portrayed in the Australian media.

That was relatively easy, however, as the children grow older the challenge for them is to practise aspects of their root culture in the wider community without hindrance. Will the mainstream accept them for who they are? There is no easy answer to this question and yet their being is real for them. They are four girls proud of their root culture and taking on some aspects of the mainstream culture as well.

There are challenges for the African migrant because of Australia's problematic race relations (Markus, 1994), which cause some anxieties in their being. As African migrant parents we keep asking ourselves: Does Australia hold a future for our children or are they better off in Africa? We do not have the physical outlook that can easily blend with the majority mainstream. A dark skin easily gives you away such that anyone can easily

ask you the common question “By the way, where do you come from?” It is a constant reminder that you do not belong even if you were born in Australia. These are some of the dilemmas that motivated this study. While these concerns are personal, I also believed that there were other families within the African community with similar concerns about the cultural identity of their children.

Moreover, the risk of losing cultural connectedness to the root culture was another concern. Cultural disconnectedness as noted by Essien-Udom (1962) may limit the creative possibilities of one’s being. Is it possible to have compensatory cultural practices in which some of the African cultural symbols and practices are re-appropriated? How do we reconfigure our identities in the diaspora such that cultural connectedness to the root culture is continued? Because of the difficulties Black/African people have experienced in the diaspora (Udo-Ekpo, 1999; Chessum, 2000) such questions became significant in my initial planning of this study. The more I examined the literature about the African diaspora the more I found evidence to suggest that the anxieties I held about the cultural well-being of my children were also true of the experiences of many other black migrant families. Aspects of their root cultural identities could possibly not be sustainable without a conscious philosophical approach (Asante, 1988). These are some of the dilemmas that motivated this study. While these concerns are personal, I also believed that there were other families within the African community with similar concerns about the cultural identity of their children.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 1 I discuss the background to the research, and the motivating factors for its significance. As a recently resettled and marginal group of people in a predominantly Eurocentric society, African migrants are experiencing tensions that are challenging their cultural identities. The problems of racism and the pressure to assimilate and subsequent root-culture loss seem to be major issues of migration experience. On the basis of these challenges I suggest that it is necessary to investigate the need for African cultural education, and the approach to its implementation. The dialogical approach known as the Ujamaa process is discussed. The

theoretical background to the Ujamaa process also known as the Afrikan Centred Pedagogy is discussed as well. It is an empowering theory that promotes collective consciousness towards community problems

In Chapter 2 I present some of the pertinent literature that deals with the concepts of African identities, migration and racism. I consider these three phenomena to be central to the migration experience. Culture is assumed to be dynamic within a particular context of its origin and history, but as we move out of our traditional cultural locations into a dominant culture, contradictions that threaten our minority being begin to emerge. I apply Bhabha's (1994), theory of liminal existence to examine challenges to minority being in a predominantly Eurocentric culture. I also examine racism and the challenges it poses for the African migrant community. This chapter provides a theoretical background for the discussion of the issues arising from the Ujamaa process.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the research design whose approach is based on Dr. Akinyela's Afrikan Centred Pedagogy theory and Ujamaa Circle process. The rationale and procedure of the method is discussed. The approach was dialogical and empowering to the participants. The participants assumed a cultural space in which they had opportunity to discuss issues affecting them as African migrants.

In Chapter 4 I examine the issues arising from the Ujamaa process, namely cultural identity and values. The identity perceptions of the participants and the implications for an appropriate culturally empowering environment are explored.

Chapter 5 examines the challenges to resettlement experienced by the participants. Their concerns are summed up into two main categories, namely: racism and assimilation. The unresolved problem of "who is Australian?" is also discussed. Australian colonial history is assumed to be partly the cause of the racial challenges experienced by the African migrant participants.

In Chapter 6 I present the desires expressed by the participants that they feel will help them to strengthen their cultural identities. The impact of the Ujamaa Circle process, on the participants, is discussed through their statements. I apply Dei's model of dealing with racism to examine possible approaches to racism and assimilation threats.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion. It sums up the intended objective of this study and the answers to the research question. The conclusion reaffirms the evidence from the Ujamaa Circle and the literature to assert the significance of an African Cultural Education program as a means of cultural re-evaluation and continuity in the diaspora.