

# **African History and Identity: A Case Study of Black British Students in London**

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**Abstract:** Through the administration of questionnaires and interviews in six of London's secondary schools, this case study seeks to investigate Black Britons' self-concepts and attitudes toward curricular depictions of continental and diasporan Africans and the extent to which the African Union's (A.U.) Pan-African outreach agenda may be advanced or challenged.

As one of the world's most vibrant cosmopolitan cities, London boasts a population of immense cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. Its contemporary global status and strength as a premiere financial and corporate center lends to its appeal for Asian, European, and Middle Eastern financiers and ensures a steady influx of residents from all over the world. However, the lures of this metropolis has as much to do with Britain's imperialist legacy as it does with the current economic order. This is especially true for Britain's sizable Black population whose swelling numbers attest to this nation's historic relationship with Africa dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as well as Britain's sustained influence among her former colonial territories. The African Diaspora of Britain, therefore, boasts a rich history of contribution to the strength of the former empire and present-day nation in economic, cultural, and socio-political terms. Her peoples are a mix of long established African communities, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Caribbean and continental African immigrants, as well as their first and second generation British born descendents (Adi, 2000). However, in spite of Black Briton's collective contributions to the strength and vibrancy of Britain, race relations have been strained as European ethnocentrism has thwarted the accommodation of this segment of this demographic in school and social policy (Solomos, 2003). Most problematic, is the contradiction evident in Britain's national curriculum affecting Black Caribbeans (566,000), Africans (485,000), those who self-identify as mixed race (674,000), and Black Other (97,000), collectively constituting Britain's African Diaspora. So extreme is the negation of Black British life, history, and agency, within the national curriculum that there can be evidenced instances of reactionary identity development, as well as an ethos of anti-intellectualism among the youth that oft result in negative self-concepts. As a result, the present-day reality of these diasporans is characterized by a dynamic negotiation of assimilation and resistance forces that both affect, and are a response to the public policy trends of the state (Byfield, 2000).

## **Statement of Problem**

In response to this crisis, many theorists purport that the suppression of African history and erasure of the Diaspora's legacy from British curriculum reinforces a notion of Black Briton as a stereotypically passive and disenfranchised peopling. Factoring in the images of Africans as portrayed in canon when formulating their self-conceptualizations has not only been found to be gravely detrimental to the personal, socio-economic, and political development of the community, but poses a significant threat to Black adolescents, whom whilst engaged in secondary schooling traverse the most critical stages of identity development (Phinney, 1990). Although the inclusion of content relevant to Black British life and achievement has been theorized as a means to foster racial and culture consciousness and ameliorate the swelling

numbers of school exclusions and underachievers, African heritage has largely been relegated to a subtopic of British history to be engaged haphazardly during the designated month of October (Britain's Black Heritage month). For government representatives such as Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Philips, the politics of textual authority has been wholly neglected. In like manner, academicians within the dominant discourse regarding the crises facing Black students in British schools such as Tony Sewell have firmly rooted the cause of the community's arrested academic development in the cultural values of the Diaspora itself, reinforcing stereotypical notions of African and African descended traditions and communities and refusing to account for Black Africans as the most highly educated group in British society (Cross, 1994). In this way, it becomes of great significance to uncover whether or not access to an unadulterated and counter African historiography and recount of contemporary agency via the oral traditions of family and elders may contribute to the advance of this segment of the Diaspora versus others.

### **Significance of Study**

Irrespective of the heightened awareness of the politics of race and culture within education, conservatism continues to tone the policy that determines the content of British curriculum, and stifles the response of the state to Black Britain's socio-political demands. It is within this context, as well as the recognition of the force of African history on critical culture consciousness in the empowerment of diasporic societies throughout the Pan-African that the A.U. has embarked upon a counter strategy to engender a 21<sup>st</sup> century African Renaissance. Centering discourse on the education-identity-mobilization nexus, African leaders and theoreticians from the continent and Diaspora gathered at the First and Second Conferences of Intellectuals of Africa and the Diasporas in 2004, in Dakar, Senegal, and 2006 in Brazil, respectively. In the panel discussion led by chairperson Adama Samassekou, on *African Identity in a Multicultural Context* at the CIID (2004), speakers drew attention to the politics of race and ethnicity in the respective continental and extra-continental African locales, the influence of globalization/westernization on the multiple African cultural identities, and the need to review and remodel curricula pertaining to Africa and Her peoples (AfricanUnion.org, 2006).

In facilitation of the achievement of the goals of the A.U. in this respect, this research endeavors toward a case study of the African Diaspora of Britain, whose location within a polity whose leadership has influenced the movement of and the world's relationship to the African for over 500 years, makes it invaluable to understanding the staggered nature of acculturation patterns, the preservation of the 'African personality' in the face of cultural hegemony, as well as the impact of historical and contemporary scholarship regarding the African on the shifting nature of diasporan identity. The notion of Diaspora itself assumes heterogeneity, and attitudes toward Africa and concepts of the self are largely context specific. This research limits its scope to uncover the nature of situations within this particular space that affect identity and feelings of self-mastery, impacted by the negation of African curriculum in British education. This study seeks to address the following questions:

- 1) What are the elements or *situations* that impact identity among adolescents and young adults of African descent in London's secondary schools?
- 2) How do the realities of Peoples of African decent as reflected in Britain's national curriculum influence self-concepts and attitudes toward the Black British and larger Pan-African body?

## Review of Literature

### *Blacks and Britain*

Though the African presence in Britain was a reality from as early as 210AD, xenophobia engendered an intermediate home grown racial narrative based on the Victorian images of the savage African that held currency from as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Jones, 1971). Such was the fear of Africa and its inhabitants during this time that in 1596 Queen Elizabeth ordered Africans out of the land, disturbed by their presence. This view of the African as a threat to the cultural integrity of Britain was a sentiment that echoed through out the centuries up until and beyond Enoch Powell's 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech in response to the great waves of Caribbean immigrants in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s (Natfront.com, 2007). With the 1979 election of Conservative Margaret Thatcher unemployment and discrimination burgeoned, and Blacks in Britain of all ethnicities and social classes became increasingly impoverished as a consequence of the heightened surge in racist politics. Thatcherism demonized the underprivileged and marginalized for their suboptimal positions, and a 'blame the victim' mentality was aggressively perpetuated (Lea, 1997). At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Blacks in Britain continued to find themselves as targets of racial aggression as the 1994 race-based murder of Stephen Lawrence and the justice department's inactivity led to uprisings all over the country causing the BBC to label the UK's antiracist policies as failing. In spite of the many military, political, entrepreneurial, literary, and arts based successes credited to members of Britain's African Diaspora, it is the former relationship and conceptualizations of Blacks in Britain that dominate.

### *Blacks and British Education*

For the large part, contemporary British historiography continues to mirror the ideological thrusts that facilitated and legitimized the structuring of the British Empire toward imperialist configurations. Britain's endeavor toward the ideals of human rights and equality, popularized in the wake of fascism, civil rights, and post apartheid and attempts to integrate the truth of the shared history and collaborative national development thrust of Blacks and other Britons, has only resulted in a very lackluster endorsement of multicultural education that largely exoticized difference as opposed to engendering the development of an expanded and culturally sophisticated lens to critically engage the reality of such a multifaceted locality. In recognition of the pernicious effects of a monocultural and exclusionary curricula, Lee Jasper, Policy Director for Equality and Policing for the Mayor of London in critique of British historiography has stated: "that the extent to which children recognize themselves in the school curriculum, the sense in which their self-identity is reinforced by the use of a creative approach to the national curriculum, is all critical to their overall educational performance", asserting the need "to rebuild and reinforce, promote and encourage self-esteem amongst young black children in terms of their sense of historical importance and location and contribution to the city of London" (Emmanus, 2005, p.1).

Pedagogues have also suggested the use of a history inclusive of African contributions and realities to inform disciplines across the curricular as a means to counter philosophically monocultural thrusts in education. Theorists considered the development of a National Citizen Education curricula design reflective of the multicultural nature of British history and society as a means of perpetuating a notion of citizens as flexible and fluid as their identities. Figueroa (2000) contends citizenship education must reflect the history of struggle on the part of segments of the population for equal rights and point up the ways in which full citizenship has been denied as a means of arresting the recurrence of such events in the future. However, England's adoption of a formal Citizenship Education agenda via the Order of the Qualifications and Curriculum

Authority and the Department for Education and Employment developed from the recommendations the Crick report, which in itself was seen as perpetuating the very racist notions of citizenship that the new thrust sought to undermine (Osler & Starky, 2000). Replete with an underlying assimilationist thread, recommendations positioned the white majority British against minorities. Minorities were attributed with behaviors aberrant to the general populace, and there was an indiscriminate homogenization of non-white nationals. This idea of adaptation to the British way of life echoed sentiments of the civilizing missions of old (Jones, 1971) as political and social rights appeared to be dependent upon the measure of conformity to national standards.

*Situational identity.* Multidisciplinary in nature, this research rests on the premises of social identity theory and adopts a framework of *situational ethnicity* as a basis for the understanding the dynamism of identity. This frame of reference alludes to the challenges of an individual's negotiation of cultures and accepts the subjective, fluid, and situational embrace of one over the other, while at times even favoring bicultural forms (Wilson, 1984). Researches suggest that "ethnic identity might ideally be accompanied by a description of the situation in which it was elicited" (Kaufert, 1977, p 126). In engaging the most relevant dimensions of situations (Belk, 1975), this study takes into account the antecedents state (the momentary moods or conditions immediately preceding choice) and the social situation (the presence or absence of others). In this way, we are able to theorize on the psychological and emotional processes that engender subtle identity shifts, as well as the inversion of macro and micro loyalties, the elements impacting the cleavage between ascribed and felt ethnicity (Stayman & Deshpande, 1989), and the extent to which strategic ethnic affiliation affords commonality with, or social distance from others. This form of analysis lays bare the hybrid nature of the individual, reinforces the verity of the fact that "all creole phenomena have at their root, the encounter with difference and with power differentials" (Kapchan & Strong, 1999, p. 241), and alerts us to the socio-politics at play in demographically plural spaces in general. In engaging Black British hybridity, negotiation of space, and critical consciousness, it becomes relevant to ascertain the extent to which this exercise of mind assumes Diaspora consciousness or whether cultural and historical awareness are requisites to the formulation of such a self-conceptualization.

*Diaspora consciousness.* Many writers continue to ruminate over the means by which diasporan consciousness may be recognized, measured, and developed. For the most part connectedness to Africa was assumed via the identification of aspects of African culture within creolized forms (Herkowitz, 1966) and led to the theorization of hybridity, creolization and syncretism. Nevertheless, the unconscious retentions, however interesting, lent little insight into the extent to which of peoples of African descent within a host country possessed the socio-political and historical awareness to self-conceptualize themselves as constitutive of a Diaspora. Other theorists explore the phenomena of race consciousness (Hanchard, 1991) as a means to predict solidarity based upon a commonness of experience and socio-political standing, but found that race consciousness did not assure unity in thought and action. However, with the creation of the Afrocentric scale (Cokley & Williams, 2005; Resnicow & Ross-Gaddy, 1997), Black psychologists deployed a tool to obtain general measures of critical consciousness, attitudes toward the African homeland, and self-identification patterns, accounting for three of the most vital themes of discourse relating to Diaspora. The utilization of this tool in conjunction with the narratives of individuals themselves has been theorized to be an effective means to obtain a more nuanced and contemporarily relevant estimation of the nature of felt and expressed Identity (Grills & Longshore, 1996).

### Method

Data for this research will be collected via the completion of a Likert-scale attitudinal questionnaires and interviews in six of London's secondary schools. The administration of the survey tool and conduction of the interviews will take place during the Spring 2008 scholastic term, which extends from the first week in January to the last week in April. A random sample of 30 students from each of the six secondary school grades (year 7-12) will be identified and furnished with closed ended 15 item survey tool known as the Afrocentric scale. The Afrocentric scale measures Afrocentric values such as collectivism, community orientation, and elicits responses that alert the researcher to the existence of possible anti-Black sentiments (Grills & Longshore, 1996). The data collected from the questionnaires will be used to supplement the interview responses of 18 secondary school attendees, ranging in ages from 11-17, which correspond to the above stated grades. The participants' responses will indicate their perspectives and experiences with regard to five thematic emphases, namely (a) Black British identity, (b) measures of Afrocentricity, (c) perspectives in response to the depictions of peoples of African descent in curriculum, (d) attitudes toward Africa, and (e) ideas regarding the capacities and inclinations of members of their Diaspora and the wider Pan-African expanse. Lastly, a text book analysis of the history text will be undertaken so as to triangulate the findings.

Thirty 11-17 year old students will be randomly selected from each grade of secondary school (year 7-12) in each of the six schools ( $N=1,080$ ). To effectively target the Black British demographic, the six co-ed publicly funded state schools will be selected from the London boroughs of Brent, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southam, Newham, and Hackney within which, according to the 2001 census of Britain and Wales, the majority of London's 54% of African-Caribbean and 78% of African Britons reside. Non-proportional stratified sampling will enable to identify schools with the highest Afro-Caribbean, African British, and Black Other populations. The three informants to be interviewed in each school will be selected via purposeful sampling reflecting the three ethnic typologies of Afro-Caribbean, African British, and Black Other, or Mixed Race ( $N=18$ ).

### Findings

Taking a phenomenological approach in interpreting identity among members of the African Diaspora in Britain not only points up the dynamics of the socio-political space, but the psychology of diasporan peoples in general. In assessing the viability of the socio-political infrastructure to accommodate the African Union's Pan-African outreach agenda, identity, measures of Afrocentricity, and attitudes toward Africa and her peoples as they are affected by British curriculum is of paramount importance. The findings will allude to the processes inherent in ethnic and cultural affiliation and the elements, such as education and social exclusion, that impact it.

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