

## RESEARCH PAPER 20

### TRENDS AND CHALLENGES: THE AFRICAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND

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#### Abstract

The number of Africans living in Queensland has produced a significant population of great diversity.

In recent years, Australia has accepted and welcomed a significant number of African immigrants, refugees and displaced persons. About 1.5 % of the total Australian population of 23 million is African. Given that immigrants who have come to new countries have not only been seen as different and feared because of their distinctive culture but have also been allocated a particular place within the class structure of the society, how do Black African immigrants see their cultural identity, personal and social well-being in Australia?

What does living in a black body mean for Black Africans in Queensland? What impacts do skin colour and race have on their everyday lives? Data findings from a recent qualitative study of Black Africans in Queensland provide empirical evidence to understanding their lived experiences, opportunities and challenges. As visible migrants, the African immigrants in Queensland are positioned as different and constructed as outsiders.

The paper aims to stimulate further research on the mechanics of integration and social inclusion, and inspire individual and institutional antiracism education.

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**Africa: Diversity and Development**

**Trends and Challenges:  
The African immigrant Experience in South East Queensland**

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**Abstract**

The number of Africans living in Queensland has produced a significant population of great diversity. In recent years, Australia has accepted and welcomed a significant number of African immigrants, refugees and displaced persons. About 1.5 % of the total Australian population of 23 million is African. Given that immigrants who have come to new countries have not only been seen as different and feared because of their distinctive culture but have also been allocated a particular place within the class structure of the society, how do Black African immigrants see their cultural identity, personal and social well-being in Australia? What does living in a black body mean for Black Africans in Queensland? What impacts do skin colour and race have on their everyday lives? Data findings from a recent qualitative study of Black Africans in Queensland provide empirical evidence to understanding their lived experiences, opportunities and challenges. As visible migrants, the African immigrants in Queensland are positioned as different and constructed as outsiders. The paper aims to stimulate further research on the mechanics of integration and social inclusion, and inspire individual and institutional antiracism education

**Introduction**

*My morale was very high when I arrived here because of warm welcoming by a case worker from a settlement organization. They visited me every week, took me out and taught me the way of life in a new country. They took me to classes for enrolment and to Centrelink. I got money from the government which was not the case in Africa, - for the government to give you allowance that you are studying and integrating in a new country. They took my children for vaccination. I was amazed by this kind of government support. But it has decreased with time when you see some of these stereotypes (Bruno 2014)*

In recent years, Australia has accepted and welcomed a significant number of African immigrants, refugees and displaced persons. Political instability, economic hardship, wars, famine, education and the search for better life have pushed many Africans<sup>1</sup> to settle in Australia. For many of them, adjusting to life in Australia has not been easy. Bruno's words above capture some of the African immigrants' experiences. Bruno voices out the constant pain and disappointment among some African immigrants in the context of a predominantly white Australia. His account shows the change in morale from high to low among some Africans in their settlement journey in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study, Africans will mean 'Black Africans' from sub-Saharan Africa (the countries in or below the Sahara desert) who share profoundly similar histories and cultural traditions unlike the five North African countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt) with profoundly different history and cultural traditions even though they are geographically linked with the rest of the continent.

To most Australians who are not of African origin, as Jakubowicz (2010) observes, 'Africa is a map composed of stereotypes' - civil unrest, conflicts, war, poverty, famines, disease, dictatorships and numerous social problems. Sad as it may be to admit how real some of these stereotypes are. Despite these negative stereotypes, Africa is not just a single story. Africa is composed of many overlapping stories. If we hear only a single story about another person or country "we risk a critical misunderstanding" (Adichie 2009). The danger of the single story we have about another person, country or continent is that it creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes, as Adichie (2009) argues, is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. Stereotypes make one story become the only story. Stereotypes can serve to subvert, distort, restrict, and deny privileges, access and benefits to people.

Therefore, in the face of the increasing migration of African immigrants to Queensland, this paper seeks to provide insights into their lived realities. The paper reports on the findings of a study seeking to understand the lived experiences of first generation African immigrants in South East Queensland and focuses on the role of race and skin colour on their experiences as visible migrants. Given that immigrants who have come to new countries have not only been seen as different and stereotyped because of their distinctive culture but have also been allocated a particular place within the class structure of the society, how do African immigrants see their cultural identity, personal and social well-being in Australia? What does living in a black body mean for Africans in Queensland? What impacts do race and skin colour have on their everyday lives? This paper draws upon interview data to provide empirical evidence to understanding African immigrants' lived experiences. The paper aims to stimulate further research on the mechanics of integration and social inclusion, and inspire individual and institutional antiracism education.

### **The African Immigrants in Queensland**

In the past, Australia saw herself as an Anglo-Saxon preserve. It emphasised its whiteness and Britishness and excluded people of colour (MacLeod 2006). Being heirs to a colonial empire, Australia was built, as Pittcock (1977, p.240) argues, "Largely on a deep and abiding belief in the superiority of the British people and their institutions." Evans (1994) suggests that the demand for a 'White Australia' and the 'exclusion of black and coloured races' of every shade in the last decades of the nineteenth century was a principal factor in the federation of the Australian colonies. The *Immigration Restriction Act of 1901*, the 'White Australia Policy,' erected a colour bar and ensured that anyone who is not British or Irish should be excluded from coming and settling in Australia. The policy was designed "to keep Australia white [homogenous] and British, and to hold the 'yellow peril' of Asia at bay" (Castles and Vasta 2004, p. 141). With the policy, few non-white people gained entry to Australia on short-term basis and under strictly defined conditions. During that time, while non-whites already in Australia could not become Australian citizens, the Indigenous Australians, - the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - were not considered Australians. It was only after the 27 May 1967 federal referendum<sup>2</sup> that they were recognised as Australian citizens.

The abolition of the White Australia Policy in 1973 by the Whitlam government marked a turning point in Australia's history. It stopped the preferential treatment for British and European immigrants (Inglis 2004). The Whitlam Government declared that no future Australian immigration policy would discriminate on the basis of race, colour, nationality, sex or religion and introduced a non-discriminatory immigration policy that opened the door for non-White immigrants of different shades of colour and ethnicities to come to Australia (Batrouney and Goldlust 2005). This enabled the migration of Africans to Australia. Today,

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<sup>2</sup> The 1967 referendum changed the Australian Constitution. More than 90 per cent of Australian voters chose 'Yes' to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the census and give the Australian Government the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

African immigrants have become significant members of the Australian society. Africans account for an increasing proportion of the total Australian population. Prior to World War II and before 1976, the African intake in Australia was primarily from White South Africans and mainly white South Africans (Hugo 2009). In the period from 1981 – 2011, the total African born population in Australia has increased from 90,237 to 337,825, meaning that, about 1.5 % of the total Australian population of 23 million is African (ABS 2014). In Queensland, African born people (this includes those from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa) represent about 1.5% (63,211) of Queensland's total population of 4,332,739 in 2011, an increase of 53% (21,938 people) from 41, 273 in 2006. Of the 63, 211 Africans, 90% (56, 967 people) are from sub-Saharan Africa. White South African born population (35,549 people) accounts for over half of the number (Queensland Treasury and Trade 2014).

The African immigrants in Queensland are mainly first generation immigrants, highly visible, very diverse and a heterogeneous population. Their diversity in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, language, religion, socioeconomic and cultural orientations and history is a reflection of Africa's diversity. Most of them are migrants who left families, relatives, friends, and familiar spaces to Australia in pursuit of better life opportunities. Some of them came to Queensland in the mid-1960s as students through the Special Commonwealth African Assistance Plan, but a good number migrated to Queensland through Australia's skilled and family migration programs in the 1980s and 2000s. A significant number from Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia), Sudan, including South Sudan, Congo, Burundi, Rwanda arrived through Australia's humanitarian program in the 1990s as refugees and displaced persons after being forced out from their fatherland by wars, or persecution. A majority of the Africans in Queensland live in South East Queensland (Brisbane, Logan, Ipswich and the Gold Coast) where both skilled and unskilled job prospects are very high.

### **Immigrant Reception in Australia**

It takes courage and enterprise to migrate to a foreign land. According to Legrain (2007, p. 8.), one has to be particularly adventurous or desperate to leave behind his/her family, friends or homeland to take a leap into the unknown and try to start a new life in a foreign country. As Dion (2010, p. 648) found, among the many challenges that confront some newly arrived immigrants, as well as those who have lived in the receiving society for some time, is the possibility of experiencing discrimination because of where they came from and who they are, as seen by others through the lens of group labels—ethnicity, race, religion, language. Dion contends that to be an immigrant is to be potentially vulnerable.

As a nation of immigrants, the influx of immigrants of diverse culture, language, religion, race and ethnicity from the time of British occupation and beyond has contributed to the diversity in modern Australia. It has visibly transformed the cultural landscape of Australia and enriched its racial composition. However, as Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2008, p. 52) argue, despite support for a multicultural Australia, the important background fact is that whiteness is still a key category in the reception of any immigrant in Australia. Similarly, Henry-Waring (2008) argues that there are meta-discourses of Otherness that give primacy to Whiteness in Australia at the direct expense of visibly different migrants who have settled in Australia. According to Henry-Waring (2008, p.7), at the heart of these meta-discourses, "lay a set of pervasive ideologies that valorise whiteness as the norm, from which Others are constructed, defined, scrutinised and controlled." While Henry-Waring (2008) talks about the meta-discourses of otherness in Australia, Bryant and Pini (2010) contend that mainstream Australian identity definitions still ignore or overlook the diversity in contemporary Australia. According to Bryant and Pini (2010, p. 40), Australians of Anglo Celtic heritage are considered as normative in modern Australia while Indigenous Australians, Muslim Australians, Arab Australians, Asian Australians, and African Australians are *othered*, considered as *ethnics* and labelled as *non-white*.

### **Trends and Challenges**

How immigrants are received play a crucial role in the rate of their assimilation in many dimensions. How they are positioned or constructed has important socioeconomic

implications for them. The African immigrants in Queensland and those interviewed for this study share in common part of their identity - their visibility and immigrant background. Based on this, they have a shared history of experiencing difference and the mediating influences of race and colour. They are first defined by their 'visibility,' that is, their 'blackness.' Thus, despite the enormous social, economic and cultural opportunities (access to education, good health care, system, water, food and social security) that Australia offers to immigrants, some of the key trends and challenges emerging from the analysis of the interview data from this study are *vulnerability, underestimation and objectification*.

Before I elaborate this with some case examples from four accounts of African immigrants selected arbitrarily, we have to recall that this research represents a shift away from the problem centred focus of current research on African immigrants in Australia to investigate issues of otherness and everyday racism that Black African immigrants may confront almost on a daily basis. The findings reported here are based on interview data from a study looking into the lived experiences of first generation African immigrants in South East Queensland. The study participants consisted of ten African women and twenty African men living in Queensland in the last three years or more. The thirty participants were a select group and diverse in terms of their countries of origins, motivations for migration and qualifications. They were interviewed using semi-structured questions. The interviews lasted for not more than one hour during which their responses were probed while encouraging them to provide more details and clarification. At the time of interview, their minimum duration of stay in SEQ was five years and the maximum was thirty eight years.

#### ***i. Vulnerability***

The factors that affect immigrants' vulnerability may include their socioeconomic background, immigration status, limited English proficiency, overseas qualification, education, residential location, stigma and marginalization, national and state policies on access to publicly funded welfares (Derose, Escarce and Lurie 2007). The analysis of interview data findings suggests that African immigrants in Queensland may be potentially vulnerable. For instance, Aaron's account gives an idea of this vulnerability. It captures the many hurdles African immigrants have to get through in adjusting to a new life in Australia.

Aaron, aged sixty five, came to Australia twenty seven years ago as a political refugee with his family. He was a university lecturer before coming to Australia. He considers himself as "*part of multi-disadvantage people in Australia*" because of the many barriers that get on his way, first, as an African and second, as a NESB<sup>3</sup> migrant in Australia. His experience, particularly in relation to the recognition of his overseas qualifications, was traumatic and depressing. It took the Council on Overseas Professional Qualifications (COPQ) two years to recognize his qualifications after initially downgrading all his qualifications (BA with honours and a PhD degree) to a three-year bachelor degree in Australian standard. After many *unsuccessful* job applications, when he finally got one, a professor explaining to him why it took him years to get a job said,

*You did not realize how many hurdles you have to get through because of your background to get jobs in Australia. You came from a third world country. Furthermore, you are a Black African from a French speaking country. Worse, you are a person with no local experience and referees.*

This explanation captures the fact of the vulnerability of African immigrants. It is likely that some newly arrived African immigrants as well as those who have lived in Australia for a while may face such multiple disadvantages in adjusting to life in Australia as they are seen as Black Africans from third world countries with overseas qualifications, low English language proficiency and with no local experience nor network. Being vulnerable, it is most probable that African immigrants are at increased risk for poor physical, psychological, economic and social health outcomes as they continue to be exposed to low income and other difficulties.

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<sup>3</sup> NESB stands for Non-English Speaking Background.

## **ii. Underestimation**

As part of the ideological rationale for slavery, blackness was associated with mental inferiority and defined as barbaric, savage, ugly and evil while whiteness was associated with superiority and defined as civilized, virtuous, and beautiful (Keith 2009). The symbolic value of skin colour is seen in settings where not white is equated with a lower social status (Vaid 2009). Not surprisingly, one of the recurring themes from the interview data was the notion of underestimation. Overwhelming majority of the respondents reported incidents where they were underestimated. This is reported, for instance, in the accounts of Loretta and Jim.

Loretta, aged forty six, a skilled migrant arrived to Australia with her husband and children fifteen years ago. Currently, she owns a business and there, some of her clients wonder how she got the job. According to Loretta, *"I have met people that will say what are you doing here? You need to go back home. I have met people that have said, who gave you this job? I have met one that has said, every time I come, you are still here. How come you still have this job?"* As can be seen, what the people that Loretta met share in common is *surprise*. Perhaps, they were surprised to see there for long - *every time I come, you are still here. How come you still have this job?*

Jim, aged thirty five, came to Australia as a refugee in fifteen eleven years ago. Since arriving to Australia, he has completed two university degrees and practises in a hospital. He has a similar experience. At his workplace, some clients reject his services. According to Jim, *"It doesn't even take one week in the hospital before you receive the same weight of discrimination about your colour from patients ... Some people sometimes when they see me at the hospital, they get surprised. They say to me, 'I don't want you to do anything for me.' Unless my supervisor stands out for me, that's when I might do it because my supervisor convinces them that I was employed because of qualification and experience."* Now imagine what could happen when his supervisor is not around. Perhaps, there may be no chance for him despite his knowledge and expertise. Needless to say, Loretta and Jim's experiences may not be totally separated from the experiences of other African immigrants in Australia. It is likely they are seen at first sight from appearance of being different or being black.

## **iii. Objectification**

Again, one expected but still intriguing finding was the objectification of African immigrants. As visible migrants, despite their length of stay in Australia, African immigrants feel they are positioned as different, constructed as outsiders and rarely considered as locals or citizens. The objectification of the other, here, the overemphasis on difference found in this study is one process of cultural racism <sup>4</sup>(Essed 1991, p. 189). Objectification symbolizes that 'the other' is not seen as a legitimate part of the situation but as a foreigner, an outsider and perhaps, just a visitor or sojourner. If there is one experience respondents in the study can tell you about, it is this question, *'where are you from?'* Though; a certain curiosity may drive this question, there could be a racial basis in the question for it is always a question about otherness, identity and difference. For instance, Frank's account shows how the question can be a question about otherness, identity and difference. Frank, aged sixty, came to Australia in 1984. Despite his length of stay and becoming Australian, Frank is still being asked the question, *'where are you from?'* According to Frank,

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<sup>4</sup> Cultural racism is a form of racism that is based on: 1) A Belief in the inferiority of the cultural products, values, methods, and structures of a people assigned to a racial category and 2) the cultural consequences of race-based discrimination and inferiority/superiority assumptions (Jones 1999, p. 466). Cultural racism relies on cultural differences rather than on biological markers of racial superiority or inferiority. Thus, to understand the present effects of racism in our society, we must recognize the influence of culture in racial judgements. Today, we have aspects in our society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and Whiteness, but at the same time, devalue, stereotype and label People of colour as 'Other' different than or render them invisible (Lopes and Thomas 2006).

*I believe that this country is one of the best in the world. I live freely as long as I don't get myself into trouble. If you know what you are doing, that's the best way to go. The sad thing is meeting people and somebody asking you 'where are you from?' People can ask you, 'where are you from?' in a nice way but if they ask you in a different way, you can see where they are coming from, like they are not asking you to know where you were born. It makes you feel, even though, you are a citizen of this country, that they see you from your colour, that you can't be from this country. When you tell them I am from this country, they still resist that. ...This makes you sad that while you think you are a citizen of this country, yet people try to resist that you are not. It makes you sad of being proud that you are a citizen of this country. I can't mention their names but I have faced this many times.*

It can be argued here from Frank's account that the implicit message communicated with the question 'where are you from?' is that Frank is often seen as different and does not belong since he does not look Australian (white) enough to be from Australia. It can be a hurtful experience for one to be singled out and to account daily for being different in a place where he calls home. To be constantly asked the question simply reminds Frank and most likely other African immigrants who now call Australia home that they are seen as being different in appearance from the mainstream whites, not from here and do not belong and of course, must come from somewhere faraway.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Without doubt, immigration has continued to change and transform the face and race of many states, cities, towns and suburbs in Australia. While there is certain ambivalence around the perceptions of African immigrants in Australia over the past years, their visibility in terms of difference from the white, Anglo 'Standard Australian' is considered to be a disadvantaging social fact (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2008, p. 41). As visible migrants in Australia, African immigrants are vulnerable, underestimated, objectified, racialized, isolated and treated unfairly.

African immigrants are particularly vulnerable as newcomer group in Australia. First, they are constructed as outsiders and seen as different. Their Blackness distinguishes them from the mainstream. Combine this with many of them arriving often with overseas qualifications and with no local experience, they are put at an immediate disadvantage and as a consequence, often struggle with multiple disadvantages that impinge on their rate of settlement and mobility. Most likely, their vulnerability will have a strong correlation to where they are likely to fall on the socio-economic status spectrum.

Again, how Africans are perceived matters. The idea that Blacks are inferiors and perhaps, less competent, can lead to underestimation of Africans in a country where all should be given 'a fair go.' While, the underestimation of Africans will impede their full entry into the Australian labour market and full acceptance into the Australian society, the question, 'where are you from?' when asked within the context of difference will continue to determine who is identified as the other, who is included and who is excluded. Therefore, as long as Australian nationalism continues to be based on the assumption that only white people by default are considered authentic Australians and construct others as ethnics, African immigrants will continue to be objectified and positioned as aliens in Australia. Three issues arising from the question 'where are you from', according to Mapedzahama and Kwamena (2010, p. 4) are: First, the question conveys a strong sense of exclusion in that in a white dominated society it is asked, in the main, of certain groups of people who are visibly different. Second, the assumption behind the question – that one is not 'from here', implies the construction of an/other whose identity is tied to a faraway place. Third, it invokes in those being asked feelings of ambivalence about place when it is interpreted as demanding a justification of the claim to belonging and being 'from here.' And this may be true for the Africans being asked the question and it has significant impact on how they settle in Australia as they are left feeling that they do not belong here.

Therefore, given the vulnerability, underestimation and objectification of African immigrants, this study has implications for policies or programs targeted specifically to visible minorities' integration in Australia. Any policy for immigrants must start from an understanding of who they are and their real-life experiences. As visible migrants, African immigrants are vulnerable, undervalued and marginalized within the representation of the Australian identity. This study has implications also for further research on the economic participation, adaptation and assimilation of Black Africans in Australia. The findings suggest that there is need for more studies focusing on the real-life experiences of New Australians like the African immigrants for a better sociological understanding of their issues and assessment of any systematic exclusion and oppression in society. The study has also implications for pedagogy that is critical and committed to eliminating structural, political, economic and social oppressions in society, a pedagogy that opposes any forms of exclusionary racial relations and a pedagogy that challenges people to demand respect and equality for themselves and for others. An education that considers the values and beliefs of other race and culture, the backgrounds and identities of people will be particularly influential in achieving this. It does not matter how people look, when and how people arrive to Australia, what matters is, they are here and everyone has something unique to contribute.

Limitations of the study should be noted. First, the findings may not be generalizable to all African born population in Australia as it was conducted only in South East Queensland. Other studies may be examined to check whether the current findings are the same or match well with national trends. Another limitation is that not all Africans in Queensland were interviewed. Thus, this data set does not allow us to examine whether or not their views are the same or different but it offers an insight into the lived experiences of the participants and their experiences may not be totally separated from the experiences of other African immigrants in Australia.

## **Conclusion**

The data finding, as limited as it is, provides an empirical basis that suggests race and skin colour still matter in the lived experiences of African immigrants and that they still face some barriers and challenges in their efforts to settle in Australia. The emerging trends as discussed are among some of the issues negatively affecting African immigrants' pace of assimilation and human capital output. It is my expectation that through increased insight into their lived experiences, Australians can begin to understand who they are, what their challenges are and what constitutes their lived realities on a daily basis and begin to acknowledge and value their experiences as visible migrants. Their experiences and accounts are socially relevant and provide rich insights into what life has been for them in Australia. By definition, this paper aims to provide insights into the lived experiences of African immigrants and advocate for a socially just and inclusive society where all is given a fair go. It is about challenging the present status quo, inspiring antiracism education and contributing to the debate on the mechanics of integration.

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