

Securing a Sense of Identity

An African-Caribbean Perspective

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Migration for most people has been a positive experience, but not for all. Some have been traumatised by the experience as a result of being left by parents or being taken from grandparents unwillingly so as to join their parents and 'England-born' siblings. The Separation and Reunion conferences have shown a commitment to look at the issues of separation and how they affect those of the African-Caribbean Diaspora. As a people we have sustained damage from our enslavement and subjugation (Fletcher-Smith, 2000; Thomas, 2000).

The mass movement of African-Caribbean people is as old as slavery and these 100 years after emancipation have not been any different. Less than 60 years after being freed, slaves, the fit men from the Caribbean and Africa, were recruited as cannon fodder for the 1914-1918 Great War. Again in 1939 they were called and responded by sending men and women to fight and serve as part of the Colonial Forces. After that came the Windrush and the recent emigration of people from the Crown Colonies in West Africa and the Caribbean. Our identity has been predicated around servicing our Colonial Masters and for the first time we came in large numbers to live among them.

As I grow older, I realise that I am among few in my circles now who were born outside of the UK. Even so, most people here today have been in some way touched by separation, loss or reconstituted families. They are the people who came as children or others who were born in the UK. There is a strong likelihood that many people are children or grandchildren of the two previous categories mentioned.

Our sense of identity could perhaps be best described as 'we will do what we can' because as a group of people without property and only our labour to trade on, we were habitually moved through the islands, Panama, and the farms of North America. Migration to the UK was not new or different. The call on the colonies to supply a labour force to reconstruct post-war Britain led to many rallying to the service of Great Britain.

Our value was as a flexible labour force, easily mobilised. This has always had implications for family life resulting in many broken familial bonds, which was to have far reaching consequences for our communities.

The beginning of large-scale migration in the late 1940s to early 1960s was different to that which had gone before when trades people and professionals saw the UK as a place to gain an education or technical skills. Of course, those who did not fulfil their ambitions to return slipped into staying; the birth of children and other reasons caused them to stay. The early West Africans did go back to take responsible positions in newly independent countries. Migration again increased from African countries after the collapse of governments and infrastructures. Our identities have changed tremendously by coming to a new land. Our relationship to the Mother Country and our deference to its institutions and customs are not quite the same. The experience of struggle and discrimination has left its mark on us and this in turn has shaped our identities. Even our collective names have changed:

West Indian Immigrants
West African Immigrants
Coloured People/Afro-Caribbean
Black People
Black British People

And now people try to call me a 'person of colour'. I never did understand what that meant or if indeed the term was meant to give a soft focus and not quite a clear indication of my difference.

Young people everywhere are better able to adapt and change and it is still the case with people who for one reason or another come to the UK.

The Somali young people, who have been in the U.K. for the past 18 years are in the process of assuming a Black British identity. This is a highly complex and finely balanced matter. Holding on to who you were in the country that you came from may get in the way of being the person you need to be in order to survive in the new country. Many young people talk about having two ways of 'being': one at home and one at school or out with friends. This dual identity is inevitable for the young from minority ethnic families. The customs and mores that are valued in one culture are not necessarily respected in the other.

Securing a sense of identity is not easy now and was probably more difficult in previous decades. I have discussed elsewhere (Thomas, 2000) the difficulties encountered by young children in their bid to acquire a positive racial identity in the face of prejudice and what appeared to be the non-existence of 'Black People'. It is now possible as a black child to see oneself represented in pictures books etc.. We now know more about how children need to be positively reflected to develop well. It is the duty of the African-Caribbean community to love, cherish and nurture our young if we are to have any future. However, we have to first acknowledge the harm that separation and loss have caused us in order to recognise the way we perpetuate this harm to our children.

The people who came in the U.K. as adults had identity issues too. The Dutch based psychotherapist Elisha Davar has written about the experience of migrants and talks about them as existing in the new place as if frozen until they can live and fully participate in 'being where they are' and 'being present'. Many of those who came to the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s lived limited, frozen lives waiting until they were able to return home in order to live again.

I am also concerned about the way that young black people are victims to commercialised images and identities. These gangs close to the edge, the drug-using and drug-pushing activities which make money for organised criminals, record producers and purveyors of 'high fashion'. These images sometimes alienate the young person who has taken them on. Often this spoiled or negative identity leads young people into trouble. We see the headlines when these stars get into trouble with the law and see the powerful effect of mimicry that this has on young African-Caribbean people.

In my time the cricketer and the athlete were the positive identities of African-Caribbean men were trying to imitate. We now face a growing array of negative stereotypes and identities often related to the newspaper headlines that we create. Much work needs to be done in African-Caribbean communities in the UK to help our young so that they can also appear in the headlines for positive achievements. In order to do this a great deal of work needs to take place in our communities to prevent our youth falling into a subculture of violent crime and broken relationships.

References

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