

African migrants at home in Britain: diasporas, belonging and identity

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‘Home’ is an evocative concept for African migrants and their descendants living in Britain. ‘Home’ often appears as an elusive point on the horizon, particularly in relation to the question: ‘Where are you really from?’ An innocent question, yet it is always laden, always definitional and somehow linked to place, emotions, loyalties and documents. Does it refer to country of birth, citizenship, continent of origin, to one’s parents, to a self-claimed identity? My work with communities from Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Ghana has emphasised how people tell their stories and share their lives through the twin aspects of ‘home’ and belonging. Through a range of encounters with people in public and private spaces, tracking online encounters and debates through social media, as well as through participatory photographs and video, I have been struck by both the simplicity and complexity with which participants express how Britain is and is not ‘home’. I have found that questions of ‘home’ reveal multi-faceted material, symbolic and emotional expressions of belonging. Depending on context, place of discussion or subject you can hear and see multiple answers from a single respondent. This is not a question of confusion, tactical positioning or memory loss; rather, it reflects the complex historical linkages between Africa and Europe. In the words of the 1980s anti-racism slogan: ‘We are over here because you were over there’.

Africa has long stood in the European social imaginary as its double, its reference for all that is ‘other’ and different. Over time Africa and her diasporas have scattered across the globe and Britain has remained a primary destination for migrants. This historical dimension is an

important factor within everyday practices of what it is to make home in Britain. The movement of African communities stretches back to the earliest encounters, dominated by the slave trade, where the flow of migrants began in ports along the coast of West Africa, such as Elmina Castle in Ghana. Subsequently the long road to Britain has been taken by students, migrants, asylum seekers and spouses, creating visible and invisible diasporas of exploitation, conflict and exile, as well as communities of settlement. Diaspora networks reflect historical transnational connections of language, religion and service. These are captured in stories about the Mothers' Union, university alumni, the Scout movement and faith organisations with congregations spanning Africa and Britain. These strong links echoing the colonial episode are increasingly layered by new flows of migrants from outside former colonies. Not all Africans or their descendants maintain networks of affinity or identity with the countries of their birth or descent. Others claim alternative primary identities, and this is particularly the case in London, a global city in which the identifier 'Londoner' blurs the local with the national. Many Ugandans, Ghanaians and Congolese view being a Londoner as synonymous with making home visible in Britain. Certain areas of the city attain an association with different groups: Ugandans in Forest Gate; Ghanaians in Tottenham; Congolese in Newham. Others embrace the alternative invisibility and sense of belonging that being a Londoner offers.

Diaspora as practice or identity can be claimed, co-opted or prescribed, and it offers access to both the singularity and the multiplicity of 'home.' The space that Britain provides in terms of civil liberties engenders flexibility and opportunities for individuals to move across multiple registers of identity, yet still feel at home. Paradoxically, it can simultaneously erase identities through personal choice or the pressures of racism. This is particularly true for long-standing resident communities such as those from Uganda and Ghana, with diverse composition including naturalised citizens, students, economic migrants, refugees, children, reunified families as well as second and third generations born in Britain. This last group in particular neither hold the trauma and memory of refugee flight, nor do they know the poverty of limited opportunities that motivates the search for a better life. Instead the testimonies of these young

people, like that of Abwoli below, reflect an experience whereby her identity as British, is eroded through everyday and institutional racism that remind her that she will never be accepted as British without a qualifier. She now insists on using her Ugandan name instead of Mary, her English name: 'I *always* [her emphasis] say that I am Ugandan although I carry a British passport. Who you are on the inside is never dictated by what passport you carry.' She is British-born and a successful 29-year-old professional. I asked her why she and many in her generation held this view, to which she answered 'racism'. An injustice that few first-generation Africans claim, perhaps reflecting their dream that Britain will never be a permanent home and that one day they will return to Africa.

Everyday practices of making home in Britain also reflect access to resources and documentation. Those who are asylum seekers or undocumented migrants have limited access to home-making practices. In these three communities practices of making home revolve around ethnic identity but also around national identity, captured in country of origin *and* country of birth, as well as – for some – the continental identity, African. Diaspora identifications are captured in efforts to support development, political projects, sending remittances or sustaining culture through the arts. Yet making home in Britain also allows opportunities to extend social networks beyond ethnic identity. Examples include volunteering and befriending elderly people, providing neighbourhood advice clinics for women, men or youth across ethnic boundaries. Perhaps the length of time in Britain, the diversity of migration trajectory and historical ties also matter. For a newer community like the Congolese, the majority of whom came as asylum seekers, the immediacy of the DRC's economic and political crisis is at the forefront of their lives. Many regard themselves as a minority within a minority, coming from a French-speaking African country that was not a former colony of Britain. Few are naturalised citizens or born in Britain and resentment towards racism is far more muted amongst the youth. They instead focus their diaspora mobilisation efforts on countering the negative image of the DRC, with Eastern Congo being infamously branded 'the rape capital of the World' by a United Nations official, as well as seeking political change and the possibility of return.

Diaspora orientation does not weaken the permanent nature of home in Britain. For Abwoli, after several trips 'home' to Uganda she returned 'home' to Britain. She felt frustrated by narrower identity positions where she is considered a *Muzungu* (Kiswahili for white person) because of her country of birth, her accent, her mannerisms and outlook on life. This complicates a picture where on the one hand many first-generation Africans ignore racism, blaming it on 'bad manners' or 'poor upbringing', and on the other hand the African values they strive to transmit to their children are not sufficient to ensure acceptance in the ancestral homeland. As the scholar Avtar Brah asks: 'When does a location become home? What is the difference between "feeling at home" and staking claim to a place as one's own?' (Brah 1996). This disconnection between parents' projected aspirations and the second generation's reactions and experiences, illustrates two contrasting dynamics that sustain diasporas. On the one hand, inclusion and a sense of belonging, on the other exclusion and the search for belonging. These are not mutually exclusive, as Africans and their descendants making home in Britain realise. The sense of grievance that descendants express about racism in some respects reflects the depth of the stake they hold in Britain, which they claim as their home. □

References

Brah, A. (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting identities*. London: Routledge.

