

“Africa” in Minnesota: New Models of Translocal Culture

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Abstract

The past fifteen years have witnessed the largest migration of Africans to the United States since the transatlantic slave trade. Africans are establishing communities and re-creating culture in places throughout the United States, however, Africanists are just beginning to study African immigrant culture, history and politics in North America. Using the ethnographic case example of a nonprofit organization in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis, this paper presents some of the ways that Africans may be re-creating culture and identity in the context of American ethnic diversity. In particular it presents how some Twin Cities Africans might be adapting American notions of race, and building relations with American-born people of African descent from the Caribbean, Latin America and the United States. It argues that geographically bound notions of identity and culture based on the African continent are no longer sufficient if Africanists wish to understand African cultures in the age of globalization. This paper is based on research presented by the author, in her book, *Creating Africa in America: Translocal Identity in an Emerging World City* (2004, University of Pennsylvania Press).

Keywords: African immigrant; African immigration; Globalization; African culture, African Caribbean; Afro-Latino; Translocal identity.

Introduction

Africa has come to Minnesota. About 60,000 Africans live in the Twin Cities. Although still a relatively small proportion of the overall population, they are increasingly becoming a visible and significant force in the metropolitan region's social

life. With the increased immigration of Africans, Asians, Latinos and others throughout the 1990s, Minnesota became home to one the most rapidly growing and increasingly diverse populations among mid-sized Midwest cities. The state is home to the country's largest concentration of Somali immigrants and has significant numbers of other East Africans as well as people from West and Southern Africa. According to the 2000 Census, the Twin Cities have the country's most diverse black population in terms of national origins.

This is quite a cultural shock for a region where, as remarked by a *Wall Street Journal* writer in an article on the state's changing demographics, as late as the 1980s a mixed marriage meant a marriage between a Norwegian and a Swede. The Twin Cities in particular have become a sort of global crossroads and now also have the country's largest urban Native American, Tibetan refugee, and Hmong communities.

Although little studied, the United State's nonprofit sector has been a major forum for people of African descent to re-define and organize cultural diversity. Whether the example is the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Garveyism, or TransAfrica, the voluntary sector has been an important experimental field for defining African identity in America. This paper summarizes how a community-based nonprofit is creating alternatives to mainstream notions of African identity, health, and culture that build on the diverse traditions of people of African descent now living in the state of Minnesota.

In the past decade, about a dozen Pan-African nonprofit organizations have emerged in the Twin Cities. These nonprofit groups self-consciously attempt to create more expansive and inclusive notions of African identity in America, and work with a diverse clientele, broadly defined as of African descent. These groups work on a variety

of issues and with different populations. For example, one is a regional coalition of East Africans working on AIDS/HIV issues both in the Twin Cities and in East African countries. Another is promoting leadership development among Africans from all over the continent. Others work with African Americans, African Caribbean, Afro-Latino, Africans and others to address common community concerns such as health care, housing, education, and economic development in the Twin Cities, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Several of them have created satellite organizations in African cities or towns to address similar issues with participants volunteering and providing philanthropy in the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa.

My research is an ethnographic case study of a Minneapolis-based nonprofit working with a diverse clientele, including Africans, African Americans, and African Caribbean/Latinos, to deliberately re-create “cultural ways of healing”, to address hypertension, diabetes, and other lifestyle-related illnesses that disproportionately affect Africans, African Americans and other minority groups.

The Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) manifests that these and other illnesses are being caused by individualism and the loss of culture and social connections as people attempt to assimilate to Western lifestyles. This assimilation process creates depression and sedentary lifestyles that cause diabetes and high blood pressure. In their theory, as people assimilate they lose their ability to listen to the voice—the wisdom—of the ancestors, which literally lies inside the bodies of all people of some African descent. Because of this increasing inability to “listen to the body”, African peoples can no longer hear the ancestral wisdom of health and wellness taught over the generations. This condition is called “dis-ease”—a state of growing disconnection from ancestral heritage

and culture which is physically manifested in illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension, conditions that are not thought to be particularly endemic in participants' African home communities.ⁱ

This ancestral energy is literally described as “blackness”—which is not skin color or any other phenotypical feature in the CWC context. It is literally African historical energy inscribed into the bodies of people of African descent. In this model, an “African” person would be anyone with even a partial African ancestry, even if born outside of Africa, unaware of one’s African lineage, or unable to speak an African language.

The CWC provides health counseling and community building services designed to “re-connect African mind, body and spirit”---to heal the disconnections from heritage purportedly caused by assimilation. The CWC operates an “Invisible College” where community elders and others who are recognized as experts in some aspect of African knowledge teach others leadership, dance, or martial arts to name just a few classes. Movement classes, based on African rhythms, are thought to reawaken the African ancestors whose wisdom is lying dormant within persons of even partial African descent.

CWC leaders, who are of various African and African American or Caribbean backgrounds, also provide consulting and cultural immersion services to non-African health practitioners, community workers and others servicing people of African descent. For example, doctors and medical students from a prominent local university learn about African and other culture and healing methods at the CWC. African immigrants and other participants of African heritage take classes such as African Ways of Knowing, which are designed to cultivate indigenous “African” health and wellness practices.

These sessions are designed to teach participants practical strategies that change lifestyle and related habits, for example diet and exercise, that promote health and wellness.

The CWC's interior is designed to also symbolically represents the integration of "mind, body and spirit", as well as different African and Western worldviews. Thus, for example, African masks and textiles are integrated with those of different traditions, including Asian, Native American, Latino and European. The leadership describes itself as creating a surrogate sense of an "African home" where traditional culture exists harmoniously with other cultures.

All CWC activities actively use journaling and pedagogy the leadership considers "African". Instead of using a teacher-centered lecture style in classes, leaders ask participants a series of questions to draw out the "African knowledge already inside their bodies". This method and journaling are also important because they promote storytelling, which the leadership describes an African method of teaching and learning. Classes tend to be diverse, having African-descent persons of different nationalities, ethnicities, occupations and religions participating. Furthermore, the leadership incubates start-up African and other nonprofits, providing fiscal agency, use of office equipment and other administrative support to position them for growth and development. These activities are seen as creating a microcosm of an inclusive, diverse African community, whereby people of different ethnic, national, class, and clan backgrounds learn to cooperate in the CWC context with the desire that they will "learn to build African community" locally, and more broadly within society as well.

The CWC model is instructive in our effort to understand how African identity is being re-created in America in different ways. First, in this approach African identity is

not invested in the land, but is literally and viscerally inside the bodies of African-descent persons. The CWC is attempting to create an alternative to mainstream notions of culture and identity that accommodates the global dispersal of African peoples. Africa is not rooted in place of residence or even origin. This type of embodied identity theory, which is also described in terms of “black-ness”, can also be seen as a form of resistance to dominant American notions of race, which associate darker skin tones with inferiority. In this model, black-ness becomes a form of ancestral power that holds culture throughout history and across geography. The CWC model can also be interpreted as a form of resistance against dominant notions of culture rooted in geography: the CWC approach to culture is inherently translocal. Culture is vested in the body and the global social networks in which Africa-descent people live.

The CWC case and other translocal nonprofits present an opportunity to witness culture in the making and to better understand postmodern community formation among Africans. As social science makes its earliest efforts to analyze African-based identity formation (e.g. Lefkowitz 1997), there is a tendency to presume that every African or African American effort to theorize and/or define identity vis-à-vis Africa is an act of Afrocentricity. Furthermore, in much scholarly discourse “Afrocentric” has become a very general descriptor for the interest among African diasporan peoples to learn about the African components of their cultural history, in addition to its European or American ones (Walker 2001). Thus, from this limited perspective, the CWC’s work would be seen as Afrocentric, but so would any general effort to educate Americans, particularly African Americans, about African components of their cultural heritage.

A more detailed analysis of African diasporan identity formation and historiography presents a more complex picture. Afrocentricity is just one of several often competing models in a longstanding African diasporan effort to define transnational identity. Afrocentricity is more productively seen as just one stream of an alternative construct in a dynamic and variegated complex of African diasporan cultural theory and historiography (see Du Bois 1939; Padmore 1956; Levine 1977; Drake 1982; Appiah 1992; Gilroy 1993; Walters 1993; Harrison and Harrison 1998; Moses 2002). Despite what may be our personal dislike for some versions of these theories, anthropologists and other researchers can more objectively and productively understand transnational cultural collectivities by viewing them as examples of universal practices of culture production and community formation (Said 1978; Anderson 1983; Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; Chatterjee 1986; Mudimbe 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

CWC African epistemology, particularly the notion of mind/body/spirit unity was also a response to abstracted, ideational notions of culture that are arguably part of mainstream North American culture and much social science discourse as well (cf. Abu-Lughod 1991). CWC discourse suggests that this rupture between mind/body/spirit was caused by the fragmentation that accompanied capitalist culture. CWC Africanness and cultural healing is experienced as suturing the fissures caused by so-called European systems of thought. While CWC participants and leaders do not construe the CWC's theories of African mind/body/spirit unity as an explicit critique of social science theory, the parallels of its approach with various embodiment theories were striking and instructive. The epistemology provided the philosophical basis for a body-based (that is, embodied) notion of culture in which the connections between cognition and bodily practice were theorized, often in the context of power relations. In the CWC approach, thought was at once cognition and action. The CWC created programs that taught participants how to self-consciously instill its epistemological principles into bodily techniques, for example, new self-healing methods. In this way ideation and practice were inextricably linked into a seamless cultural experience as suggested by various embodiment theorists (e.g., Csordas 1990, Napier 2003).

Embodiment theorists (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, 1984; Csordas 1990) have attempted to redress the conventional bifurcation between thought and action, however, according to Stoller, much of embodiment theory reflects a "Eurocentric" conception of the body and analyzes it in primarily intellectualist and textual terms. Like the CWC's cultural wellness program, Stoller (1997) argues for a fully sensual ethnography that expresses the

whole body's experience of cultural life, including its smells, tastes, textures, and other sensations. Such an approach expands anthropology's knowledge base beyond its conventional focus on vision and speech (also see D. Howes 1991) and bridges the culturally specific mind/body divide inherent in much of Western philosophy and social science.

Dismissing the efforts of black people in America to define their identity in relation to Africa as "Afrocentric" constrains the discipline's capacity to understand these contemporary cultural dynamics and their potential contribution to social theory. It deprives the field of the rich dynamics of cultural reproduction that have always been undertaken in the Americas and are now pronounced with the immigration of Africans to the United States. Africanists interested in documenting contemporary African culture and using these data to inform social theory must embrace such activities as serious cultural undertakings worthy of study, even when they contradict longstanding, and perhaps outmoded, canons about who and what is "African" in mainstream African studies and other disciplines. The CWC and similar groups are engaged in the type of culture-making activity that numerous studies over the past twenty years or so (see Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a) now recognize as implicit in all societies, not just diasporan variants (see also Brandon 1993; Mudimbe 1994; and Barnes 1997 for other examples of African diasporan "culture-making"). Following Gupta and Ferguson (1997b:4), instead of taking the notion "African" as a given, Africanists should start from the position that all "associations of place, people, and culture are social and historical creations for study, not natural facts.

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!This article is an excerpt of an ethnographic case study of the CWC's African identity belief systems (see Copeland-Carson 2004). I am claiming here that the CWC's folk theories and perceptions of African health and wellness are necessarily accurate or empirically "true" epidemiological facts.

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