THE IMMIGRANT AND "BRITISHNESS" IN BRITAIN

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The contestation of multiculturalism in Britain is not as new as "multiculturalists" would have us believe, in actual fact, it has always been around. Nonetheless, politicians in their attempt to please "middle England" (an imaginary social constituency) tend to amplify it by mistakenly concocting it (as if indistinguishable) with immigration and asylum-se   eking. As for political and social observers (including right wing media houses), they tend to deny its relevance by simply diminishing it to a "conceptual" exercise. Calculatedly, they collectively seem to forget that Britain has always been a country involved in migration, although in recent centuries emigration has been far more important than immigration. Indeed a fresh report by University College London (UCL) titled "*Migration Matters*" revealed that in 2003 alone there were 191,000 Britons who emigrated from Britain whilst the number of those who returned from Abroad was only 106,000. The report which came out in May 2005 explicated that in spring of 2004, just before European Union (EU) enlargement there were 2.857m foreign nationals living in the UK, 4.9 percent of the total population. Forty three percent of them were European, of which 79 percent were from European Economic Area, within which citizens have the right to move freely between countries and take up work. Around quarter were Asian, 17 percent African and 10 percent were from the United States. Women were more than men (53 percent) the report said. Researchers John Salt and James Clarke who wrote the report moreover noted that: "UK has a modest size of foreign population when compared to countries such as Austria, German and Spain, but it is second to Germany in numbers of those emigrating". According to the report, there were more people who left Britain than those who came in during the 19th and 20th centuries. Even at the present moment, the Home Office itself admits (though reluctantly) that net flow of immigrants and asylum seekers to the UK has been on a downward trend for years. So why then, as well one might wonder does the African community still incur the continuous victimisation under the pretentious label of multiculturalism.

For registered Africans dwelling in the UK (these days baselessly and pompously labelled [BBA] Black British Africans by Home Office's statisticians) in sub-zero London, If asked, as well one might, why multiculturalism matters, and why Africans matter in particular, I think one would have to shallowly reply: were it not for them would the debate subsist today? I mean does *Wanda* fit in Wimbledon, *Kinuthia* in Kensington or how about *Nagudi* in North Yorkshire? On the face of it this may seem an odd ponder, but for me this ought to be the "real"

contestation of multiculturalism. Unencrypted, multiculturalism means a mutual cultural respect for all communities in a given locality- this, however, has never been the case for the African community in Britain. This is because it is often supposed that the African community in Britain came here after the period following the Second World War. This is not true. There is indeed strong evidence that suggests that before the European colonial encounter in the 15th century, there was an African presence in Britain as far back as the 9th century, some historians have even traced black presence here much earlier than that.

One obscurity about the multicultural bandwagon is that it consciously fails to acknowledge this historical fact and subsequently denies Africa's and Africans input in British society. Globalization (*the interconnectedness of the world; the flow of ideas, criminal activities, goods, images, weapons and a world wide flow of capitals and so forth*) now being a poignant reality means that almost every cultural community exists in the midst of others and is resultantly inescapably influenced by them. As such, in 2006 it is almost impossible to think of a culture except perhaps for the most primitive and isolated that is not influenced by others. Perceptively, I concur with the Labour peer Professor Bhikhu Parekh in his respected testimony *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (commissioned by the government) when he termed United Kingdom a "community of communities". The disposition, however, is made stickier because cultural as well as the political and security establishments are culturally drunk with imperialism in still naively subscribing to the mythical notion that Britain is still a homogeneous society (if at all it ever was).

In this connection, it is just to pronounce cultural imperialism, deep rooted in British political and cultural veins, as one of the obstacles that is hindering equal cultural respect by suffocating recognition of Africa and Africans countless contributions to British society. As far as the African community is concerned, the UK government (regardless of its political ideological manifestation or disguise) as well as politicians, neo-fascist political organisations, the mass media, employers, institutions representing the labour movement and sections of the British working class have all acted upon and articulated racist beliefs, and by doing so they have identified africans and collectively the (BME) Black Minority Ethnic groups as an excluded lot and as such crucified them enduringly on the periphery of society.

Nowadays the registered African specie armed with his British citizenship (virtue of birth or naturalisation) find himself with legal rights and responsibilities to the state, yet he remains culturally an alien to society and the country regardless of his nationality status. For most young Africans born or brought up in the diaspora (or to solicit the trendy Home Office lingo: black British Africans) the notion of culture has to a degree been problematic, because they find themselves caught up between two cultures- the static and unyielding parental culture (whereas when we were growing up, receiving the occasional smack for displaying anti-African behaviours was perfectly customary) and the dubious freedoms of Britishness (where almost everything is seen through legal lens. For instance, at school and the outside world what we at home understood for generations as our parents rights to discipline us was rearticulated to us as either child abuse or domestic violence. No other categorization was given) - leading to cultural conflict and not (as many would rather we say) an identity crisis. We have, however, been caught up in a double blind-damned for having not enough culture or for having too much. On the

contrary, when visiting my ancestral homes in East Africa, as often I do, natives are often astonished by my cultural simplicity, especially given that I am inexorably subjected to hybridism – proudly embedding chunky parts of africaness as well as inevitable elements of britishness. Paradoxically, it is almost impossible to tell apart the local youth culture from that of London, New York, Paris or Berlin. In the past few years, whilst on visits to several African countries this has always been the reality. Instead of burgeoning culturally through an African vein such as *Nairobisation*, *Durbanisation*, *Kampalisation, Sowetisation* or *Dar-Saalamisation* the local urban youth culture has at best hurriedly adopted aggressive unmistaken junky American popular culture and at worst seem to have accepted the false hypothesis of westernisation as modernisation by localising the imposition.

From an African diasporal lens, given such a racially categorised background, it is thus non-toxic to avow that were it not for the wealth violently extracted largely from Africa and a small portion of it from parts of the developing world that were subjected to the phases of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and now globalization (all dedicated to the erosion of human dignity) by Britain alongside her other European partners in crime, Brutish Britain would not have imperially graced herself "Great Britain". Hence, the impact of migration and immigration has been and continues to be one of unswerving gain to the UK. For instance the Commonwealth (a club that consists of former British colonies headed by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth), in the 1950's was an important cornerstone of foreign policy in British politics, and its trade and support were of vital importance to Britain's survival, perhaps more crucial than is the EU to Britain in today's geopolitics. In the Commonwealth were the considerable economic advantages of colonial immigration that resolved the problem of acute shortage of workers which recruitment from Ireland and southern Europe were unable to remedy at the time. The benefits have not only been of an economic nature, they have also been cultural, spiritual as well as intellectual in nature. The most conservative estimate of the debt that Britain owes to Africa was recently made by Dr Robert Beckford's documentary "*The Empire Pays Back*". The programme intrepidly broadcasted by Channel 4 on the 15th August 2005 approximated Britain's debt to Africans (in Africa as well as in the diaspora) to be in trillions of pounds.

Today it is the African physicians and nurses as well as the carers and cleaners input on the National Health Service (NHS) that is keeping Britain's population alive, healthy and prosperous. The Prime Minister Tony Blair during a speech last year was strained to confess that were it not for them the NHS could have collapsed due to staff shortage and lack or expertise in some areas of the medical profession, where it is estimated that nearly 40 % of all NHS doctors and nurses are from an ethnic minority, of a predominant African and Asian origin. The input is also visible in the arts and sports as well as in the academic world- where it has been approximated that over 50,000 African PHD holders are operational in the western world. The debate on brain drain goes on. Yet again, due to reasons that can only be described as cultural imperialism (another form of domination); one finds that there is a real reluctance in acknowledging African efforts in British society, however tangible they are. Britain's wealth is dependent on the continuous exploitation of Africans and other "economic immigrants" who provide cheap labour by

accepting jobs that white Britons do not want and are inappreciably exploitatively remunerated.

The African community continues being hammered by racism and prejudice even when it tries to better itself in order to continue contributing evocatively to British society. A recent report by the Racial Equality Council (formerly the Commission of Racial Equality), concluded that there is great under-representation of ethnic minorities across all public sector institutions. In specific, the report noted that "ethnic minority unemployment is around three times that for white people. African graduates find it seven times harder to get a job, in particular, African men with degrees are seven times more likely to be unemployed than white males graduates."

In spite of all the negative vices calculatingly calibrated by British institutions to permanently keep the African specie at bay the African community has somehow managed to progress. This is owed to the fact that the African community has had to invent physical as well as psychological instruments to deal with snags it culturally encounters in its daily struggles, when not doing insignificant and low paid jobs, Africans have ventured into self employment; thriftily, all helping towards quantifying the ethnic minority spending power that currently stands at a healthy 40 billion pounds a year!

Francis Fukuyama in his controversial yet winning 1992 thesis "*The End of History and the Last Man*" agreeably observed of inequalities due to convention rather than nature, or necessity, that the hardest to eradicate are those arising from culture. His interpretation of the black communities' exertions of the US bears resemblance (though not exclusively)to the situation facing Africans in the UK. He contended that the obstacles confronting young black persons growing up in Detroit or the South Bronx begins with substandard schools, a problem which could in theory be remedied as a matter of public policy. In a society where status is determined almost entirely by education, such persons, he argued, are likely to be crippled even before they reach school age. Professor Fukuyama argued that lacking a home environment capable of transmitting cultural values needed to take advantage of opportunity, such youngsters will feel the constant pull of the "street" that offers a life more familiar and glamorous than that of middle class America. Fukuyama observed that under such circumstances, achievement of full legal equality for black people in America, and the opportunities provided by the US economy will not make terribly much difference to the lives of such people. 14 years later, Fukuyama's "endism" analysis is today exemplified by the recent social upheavals in south of Paris by ethnic elements. Africans in Paris as in London faced by poor housing; unemployment, social exclusion, police harassment, politically unrepresented, feel they have nothing to lose by taking to the streets following Nicholas Sawkowsky's under the weather comments as well as proposing a law that efectively says that anyone under the age of 26 can be fired from a job without a reason. As far as I am concerned, the ongoing Paris suburban revolts are perfectly justified. For a simple reason; when all non-violent, democratic means of achieving a just end are unavailable, exhausted, redundant- what else is there for one to do? When state agencies charged with protecting communities fail to do so or actually attack them, self defence becomes necessary, and as Fredrick Douglas (the black American writer) once fittingly remarked: "where there is no struggle there is no progress".

On a conclusive yet semi-positive note, the 2002 Race Relations Amendment Act in Britain, which requires service providers to engage with communities such as ours, has to a degree been helpful to us. But on too many occasions one finds that it is the public sector which decides what the consultations with the African community should be as well as whom the black community representatives are. These have often been flatterers such as Trevor Phillips (chair, Racial Equality Council), David Lammy (Tottenham MP), Dianne Abbott (Hackney MP), Dr John Sentamu (Archbishop and Church of England's number two in command), to mention but a few, who have little credibility in the grassroots communities, and have no links to the neediest, this has meant that any new resources ends up not reaching those who need it most in our community.

 As such, It is thus in the government as well as British institutions and the public's interest to rid itself the cultural subordinations of ethnic minorities in this country. If we are to have a constructive debate on multiculturalism, the voices of ethnic minorities needs to be heard and their grievances resolved whilst acknowledging their achievements and contributions in this society. Rather than having western and westernised armchair professors of cultural studies and politics mimicking out what is best for us. For the arguments are simple, making mistakes that upset individuals or groups can be costly. Failing to rectify those mistakes or providing the opportunity for them to be rectified can be disastrous, both in terms of maintaining legitimacy and in terms of efficient delivery of services and programmes to all communities. The multicultural bandwagon ought to be an inclusive circle and not an exclusive one as is the presence; unless this changes I remain irked.