STRATEGIC OTHERING THROUGH 'AFRICAN AUSTRALIAN' AS A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY: A VIEW FROM AFRICAN BACKGROUND YOUNG PEOPLE IN MELBOURNE

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Abstract- African migrants are one of the recent migrant cohorts to Australia who began arriving in the early 1980s. Today, Australia hosts one of the largest number of African migrant communities in the world. In 2006, there were about 248,700 persons of African descent in Australia; and this figure increased to about 300, 000 in the 2011 census. As minority groups, Africans struggle to adapt to the Australian society. Internally, Africans have huge array of ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups and members often organise themselves along these lines; however, externally Africans are collectively known as 'African Australians'. This label displays a generalised image for all African descent people. The colloquial phrase can be interpreted in two ways: first as group identity that signals pan-African ethnicity; and second as Diasporic identity appealing to reconnect back to their motherland. Both applications seem to be positive. However, it remains unnoticed the 'strategic othering' effect engendered in such racialized or ethnicized identification. This paper discusses how the pan-ethnic identity perpetuates discourses of otherness as much as it creates Diasporic African identity. The study utilises qualitative inquiry among African background youth living in Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, and home to the largest African migrant communities in Australia.

Key terms- African Australian, identity, Othering, pan-ethnicity

I. INTRODUCTION

African migrants are one of the recent migrant cohorts to Australia who began arriving in the early 1980s. Today, Australia hosts one of the largest number of African migrant communities in the world, and the size keeps growing. In 2006, there were about 248,700 people of African descent in Australia; and this figure has increased to about 300, 000 in the 2011 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics/ABS, 2011). Prior to 1970s, immigration of black African migrants was restricted by then exclusionary policy known as 'white Australia policy' that banned immigration of black Africans. Following the removal of this policy in the early 1970s discrimination on the basis of race was removed and there was significant policy change (Hugo, 2009). From 1990s onwards, Australia began taking a large number of black African immigrants from East African countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia who were driven out by internal political turmoils, war and famine (Hugo, 2009). Most of these immigrants arrived as refugees or humanitarian entrants. Therefore, African migrants have been part of the mainstream Australian society for more than two decades now. Today African migrants constitute one of the largest minority groups in Australia who occupy structurally disadvantaged position, subjected to every racism, discrimination and negative media representation.

Critiques argue that while Australian citizenship may be granted to permanent residents who meet certain criteria, Australian nationality is not easily accessible to African migrants whose physical appearances and language practices do not sound like 'Australian' (Ndhlovu, 2014, p.128). In other words, in the face of Australian multiculturalism where ethnic and cultural diversities are celebrated, 'Australianness' and Australian identity continue to be redefined in confrontation with the 'African other' (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Matereke, 2009; Hatoss, 2012; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2013). In this regard, African migrants are 'othered' in multiple ways, ranging from everyday encounters of discrimination and racism to the most systematic, structurally embedded social exclusions from mainstream labour markets or residential segregations. The integration, social inclusion and participation African refugees and migrants into the mainstream Australian society remains controversially low, problem that is exacerbated by structural discrimination, interpersonal racism and 'visibly different' appearance (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007). For instance, studies among Sudanese refugees show that although South Sudanese Australians have the desire to embrace Australian identity together with their ethnic identities, mainstream Australians categorically disposition them as temporary residents, outsiders or 'strangers' because of their physiological features and high visibility (Hatoss, 2012; Ndlovu, 2014).

Historically, the different immigrant cohorts who arrived in Australia have experienced some form of discrimination, racist taints or exclusion depending on where they come from. With Anglo-Australians being at the centre, people from diverse backgrounds were being discriminated and treated in stereotyped ways. For instance, during the pre-war periods, immigrants from Southern European countries such as Italians, Greeks, and Maltese were once subjected to exclusion due to their non-Anglo background (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007). However, today

these groups of migrants have completely blended into the mainstream Australian society and have become 'invisible or hidden migrants' (Hatoss, 2012, p.53). Discourses of 'immigrant othering' has now shifted towards the comparatively recent arrivals such as African refugees and Arabic speaking Middle Eastern migrants who are 'visibly different' on the basis of their skin colour, ethno-linguistic, religious or cultural dress codes(Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007). Migrants from these regions with high level of visibility suffer more than those who are 'hidden' into the dominant group because they can easily stand out, targeted or identified wherever they go. In other words, they have the least advantage to assimilate and become 'hidden' into the mainstream Australian society like earlier migrant cohorts.

Another area in which African migrants become excessively racialized is in mainstream media reports. The media perceives African migrants in a generalised, pan-African ethnicity 'African Australian', a term that has been imposed for bureaucratic convenience without proper attention to its 'othering' effect (Phillips, 2011, p. 60). In view of Phillips (2011) one effect of such labelling is that 'African-Australians' continue to be perceived as always refugees, trauma victims, problematic strangers, and ultimately placing them in socially disadvantaged positions. Studies have shown that racially motivated, sensationalized and highly stereotyped media reporting negatively lament African migrants in 'ethnic gang crimes', youth criminality, and related antisocial behaviours (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2007; Windle, 2008; Collins & Reid, 2009; Jackubowicz, 2010). These negative media images against African migrants are politically sensitive and seem to be deliberate propaganda. These kind of actions have dual-purposes: first to thwart migrants and refugee coming from African because they are deemed as incapable of adjusting to the Australian ways of life. This was practically seen in 2007 cut of African refugee intake from the proposed 70 percent quota down to 30 percent, a political action that was justified by Sudanese refugees labelled as incapable to 'settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life' (The Age, 2007). Actions of these type may be short-lived and have only immediate consequence. However, the second, and perhaps most important impact could be how long the already resettled and naturalised 'African Australian' citizens would continue to suffer from unrealistic media representations remains unanswered. Strategically, this is important question because the situation seem to continue without improvements. Single individual incidents continue to be used as benchmarks to stereotypically judge and generalise blames for all 'African Australians'. This is an unnoticed yet consequentially significant problem that should be investigated. Why individual incidents are not taken 'faults' of those person(s) engaged in it? Why blames are put on 'African Australians' as a whole? This paper discusses how the pan-ethnic identity 'African Australian' perpetuates discourses of 'strategic othering' among African migrants by exploring narratives and experiences of 'African Australian' youth, born or raised in Australia.

Brief definition

But what is 'othering', and how can minority ethnic groups be othered? Powell and Menendian (2016, p. 17, italic in original) defined othering "as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities. In their view, social classifications on the basis of religion, ethnicity, race, class, sexual orientation, skin colour, etc. are dimensions of othering. In this context 'othering' is a broad concept that includes various forms of social differences, stratifications and inequalities prevalent among societies that become the sources of prejudice and stereotypes. Initially theorised by postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak (1985), othering has gained winder relevance in sociological studies of group-based inequalities and differences (Zevallos, 2011; Powell & Menendian, 2016). It is dialectical notion of the self and other, often driven by psychological warfare, or group thinking of one against the other. By taking the case of British colonial rule in India, Spivak analysed the unequal and exploitative relationship between British colonial rule and their subjected others, redefining the cultures and norms of natives. Since then the notion of the 'Other' has gained wider relevance in sociological studies to examine group-based inequalities. By applying this concept, we can examine the position of minority groups in relation to the dominant group, and underlying power dynamics that inform this relationship. By constructing dialectical relations of the self and the other, individuals in society create social identities, belonging and their position in those social categories (Zevallos, 2011).

II. RESEARCH METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

This article utilized qualitative inquiry, and one-on-one in-depth interviewing that aimed at harnessing experiences and narratives of participants. Sample participants involved young people, aged 18 to 25 year olds, from the Horn of African migrant communities, born or raised in Australia and living in Melbourne, Australia's second largest city and home to the largest number of African migrants in Australia. Totally eighteen (M=12, F=6) individuals were recruited for interview using snowballing sampling method in order to manage the problem of inaccessibility. Participants were asked several topics including their identity and sense of belonging in Australia, challenges encountered, and issues related

to pan-African ethnicity, 'African-Australian'. Data were
collected between 2015 and 2016 for doctoral study, and analysis of this article focused segments of data dealing with pan-African ethnic identity, 'African Australian'. Thematic analysis was adopted that explored, analysed and interpreted participants' experiences and reflections. Ethics review and clearance was obtained from La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee where the author is affiliated with. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned random codenames.

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of participants' experiences and reflections indicate complex results about what it means to be seen as 'other', but generally pinpoint the negative experiences and challenges that one faces in Australia as minority 'African immigrant'. Participants mentioned a lot of concerns they encountered and confronted in their daily life, and most of these tap into the problem of 'othering' due to their racial identity. An individual or group based discrimination, racism, and generalised labelling against all Africans in general emerged as important themes, outlined below.

Being 'African Australian'

The tendency to lump all people of African descent together into an umbrella identified 'African-Australian' has become common in mainstream media or wider Australian society. The pan-ethnic identity not only homogenises African migrants but also contributes towards biased stereotypes for all (Phillips, 2011). Participants have mixed reaction towards the commonly used identity label, 'African Australian', with some embracing it as part of their ethnic identity and others rejected it altogether as inaccurate and too broad description. While for those who accept it, the hyphenated phrase has positive connotation and embrace it as their ethnic identity, others dismiss it on ground that it doesn't accurately describe to who they, or their desired self-ethnic identity. There appeared shared opinion among participants that being identified, or identifying oneself as 'African-Australian' entails the more colour specific term, 'black'. In this sense being 'African-Australian' is interpreted as 'black'.

Participants believe that as used in Australia, literally the term 'African Australian' is automatically associated with the word 'black', or person of dark skin. They claim that as used by mainstream Australians 'African Australian' is generic name and refers to all black people of African descent living in Australia. While identifying himself as 'African Australian', one young male participant commented:

I like to say I'm global citizen if there is such a thing but at the moment in Australia I say 'I am African Australian', what does that mean? Just somebody who is African descent that is born in Australia or lived here long enough to become citizen of the nation.

Another female participant, Adau, added that to be African Australian 'will probably just means someone who is dark skin and that lives in Australia'; but commented that this expression is too broad to incorporate the diversity of African migrants. For those participants who dismiss it, the phrase not only ignores the ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity of Africans, but it is also meaningless to construct continental designation because Africa is a continent, not a country by which people can be classified or identified as such.

It doesn't make sense to me but I don't know, for some reason I have learned to accept that I don't know why because it should be like Africa is a big continent, so it is not a country someone should have been classified as 'African' (Aster, female)

'African other' in white Australia

Several participants refrain from identifying themselves as Australian because they believe that being 'Australian' is interpreted as being 'white' and they are excluded from that group. In view of Sarah, second generation young Muslim of Eritrean heritage, despite rhetoric of multiculturalism Australia continues to be perceived as white nation.

That is why I don't identify myself as Australian because it does have this white thing to it because otherwise why would people ask me 'where I am from' if you assume that Australian is everything. Why would they feel they need to ask me 'where are you from', like 'what is your background', 'you speak really well, were you born here?' so I am still considered as other; how can I consider myself as part of something that people don't see me? Why don't other people get asked the same question, it doesn't make sense.

Sarah's contention also suggest that the seemingly trivial question of everyday conversation 'where are you from' makes her feel excluded, un-Australian, or 'othered'. Previous studies show that as members of minority groups African immigrants hardly considered as full members of the Australian society and Australianness is defined in confrontation with the 'African other' (Matereke, 2009). As Ghassan (2012) stated a belief in the
'fantasy of white nation' prevails as dominant ideology from which other minority immigrant groups are seen as 'ethnic objects'.

Similarly, Mona 's account shows how 'African Australian' as identity label is chosen and imposed by mainstream Australians to make sense of African immigrants in the simplest and generic way while also markedly differentiating them from the rest of the society. In this regard, the hyphenated designation serves as identity marker to categorically separate African migrants from the other Australian society.

If a person saw me they would obviously first of all, I am from another country, right; that I was, if not born here or whatever. So a white Australian would ask me

"where are you from". If I say "I am Australian", they will ask me "no but where are you really from". So I have to say, 'yes I am Oromo or I am Ethiopian'. But then they can reverse it and if they would ask me "where are you from", I say 'Oh, I am Ethiopian', 'Oh but you speak really good, your speak English is like me, are you Australian?" So, there is really no answer that they ever are really satisfied with, to be honest. Academically or sometimes, just be digestible, they identify us as African Australian. This is just, not for my sake or my community sake, it is for their own sake so that they can understand and they might know how do you feel between both and how I can make sense of you because you are an anomaly to me, you are stranger to me. So, it is perplexing (Mona, female, 20)

In addition, Mona 's experience reflect that anyone seeing her in public spaces would automatically assume her as migrant. This adds to the fact that 'Australian' is predominantly perceived through the lens of whiteness from which other, non-white, black Africans continue to be treated with a 'guest mentality'. During the initial resettlement periods, immigrants or refugees are 'guest people' in the sense that they are new comers, and may need to be re-socialised to local values, language and ways of life. However, once stayed for several years, or generations, they are no more 'guests' in the real sense of the term.

Everyday encounters of racism and racialized othering

The practice of 'othering' can occur at both individual and group levels (Powell & Menendian, 2016). In either case, any form of negative discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice, or racism is purported. In Australia, white hegemonic power widely and tacitly operate to construct problematized non-white others and silence any surfacing racist discussions (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2013), yet racism or 'racialized othering' can be manifested in different forms and structural agents. For example, evidences show that African migrants have been extensively overrepresented in mainstream media in more racist way, portrayed as 'problematic groups', or 'undesired others' (Windle, 2008; Ndhlovu, 2014).

In this study, several participants have reported that black African Australians become easily singled out, suspiciously targeted by security staff, police, or ordinary white people. In view of these young people, Australia appears as 'white supremacist', and 'inherently racist' country. For instance, Charlie, an Ethiopian background young male said for many black people in Australia racism is 'something that you can test out, it is there, it is visible, but it is not as in your face, or as loud like in other countries, like someone is not gonna come and scream at you 'go back home', 'black dog' or whatever, even though they do that when they really are pissed off, like that is the extreme situation'. For many African-origin young people, racism is an everyday encounter that one has to face it when walking down the streets, riding public transports, or in shopping centres. It is not a myth but an everyday reality that one has to live with.

If you look at it, just here if you're walking in the street and you see someone white or anything, they will give you an eye. Just like anybody else, not everybody, but these people out there look at you, 'okay he is black', you know, this is just, I don't know, there is not much awareness of racism, I am not just saying this because of that but I have been called a nigger, I have been called black guy, you know, like not just 'Oh dark skin', it is just, the way they're saying is discrimination. So, how can you feel like everyone is saying is discrimination, you know. (Jemal, male, 20, came to Australia at age 2)

Another female participant, Mona believes that Australia is 'not just racist but a white supremacist country built of that, it capitalizes of that every day'. She emphasised how racialized problems have existed for long time since colonial settlers and recently reignited against African refugees and migrants. In a concluding remark, Mona says: so there is a lot of wrong with this country, like I said, I wanna bring you back to the fact that it is very extremely racist, xenophobic as well, so very afraid of the other.

As a result of frequent experiences of negative discrimination, harassment, or stereotyped treatments, young African Australians have limited spaces to belong in Australia. Describing this situation, Jemal, says:

I honestly think that how can somebody belong to something that you always encounter discrimination with? You know, you could belong to Australia, but how can you want something that doesn't want you? You can't want it because it conflicts with you, with who you are (…) if I said I belong to Australia, Australia is just the name; it is just the name. The people that live in Australia make Australia, you know. If the people that make Australia discriminate you of your colour, of your race, of your religion, how can you feel that you are part of it? So, to answer your question, Australia is home, Australia is everything but I don't think I belong to Australia.

As Jemal's experiences reveal, people being discriminated feel alienated, excluded, or marginalised and ultimately feel non-belonging in the society. Rahel, a second generation female, shares Jemal's ideas and underscored how Australia continues to be redefined as white nation while people of diverse background are treated as non-Australian. She said 'this country makes you feel that if you are not white and blonde hair, blue eyed, you are not Australian, so papers mean nothing'. As Rahel noted having Australian citizenship and being seen as Australian are two different things. Minority groups such as African Australians are certainly Australian citizen but their Australianness doesn't seem to go

beyond that paper value to be incorporated as full member in the society. They are excluded or discriminated by virtue of their physiological features. This contradicts with multicultural policy of Australia where everyone is believed to be welcomed and equally treated as member of the nation.

Fear of the other…

An unjustified, irrational and stereotyped fear among 'significant others' is another occasion where minority groups are being 'othered'. Several participants have mentioned about this occurrence. They said that most white people get scared of black people, particularly black young men. In public transports such as trains or buses white people do not want to sit or stand next to black person, move away from them, or ostensibly get scared of black people because they fear something wrong may happen to them. A lot of participants reported that they have seen or experienced this situation that white Australians have an irrational fear of black African people. For instance, Sibet, South Sudanese background young man, stated his experience as follows:

It is like they look at me in a different way, at a different perspective really because there is a lot of news about us really. There is a whole article about basically black people being bad, their race being bad, that is what why there are racism. That is what I feel like most of them are afraid at the same time when they see at me, they feel like I am going to do something to them you know. But they are assuming stuff, they don't know anything, they don't bother coming to us. They just assume like what they read on the news is what they're expecting in a real life, you know. When they see a black guy on the train, they feel like they have to move down or look for a bit till they get off the train.

Here Sibet's account raised crucial points how biased and racist mainstream media feed the public unrealistic messages, which influence the attitudes and behaviours of white people towards blacks. This has been recurring problem in western media channels, TV programs, or movies that display negative messages against black people which makes white people to envisage blacks as bad or dangerous. It is these preconceived stereotypes that white people translate into reality whenever they see, or meet an innocent black person. The impact of such preconceived negative judgement is clearly explained by an Eritrean background young man, Temesgen, in the following extensive quote.

Interviewer: What do you think other people, just people on trains, or down the streets, how you think they consider you to be?

Temesgen: maybe because the way I dress but they consider me as may be criminal because I like wearing black clothes, black is my favourite colour, I always wear a lot of black and they see me, they might get scared if I am walking across the road, I think they sometimes get scared, I don't know.

Interviewer: why do you think they are scared?

Temesgen: because they tell themselves that I am gonna do something, I am not gonna do anything, you know, they see may be one movie here about black guy did this, black guy did that, they immediately think every black person is like that. So me, I am just trying, like I am going to school, or going to training and I am not looking, talking or bother about anybody. I am just trying to go and get there. And they see me walking, they stop. This happens a lot on regular basis, they stop, they turn around, they walk the other way, you know. I see them and I get sometimes I find it funny. But other times I am like 'what did I do?' you know, why they think like that, how am I gonna be me 100 percent? I am happy, always smiling but how am I going to be myself like this, and people always just immediately think I am bad, immediately running away or whatever.

Temesgen's narratives indicate that silent, unspoken but in a racially motivated gestures and actions can cause emotional or psychological harm to minority other. These types of 'silent actions' can deprived of the person's inner self and peace of mind, a situation experienced by Temesgen as he wonders why white people get afraid of him for no reason.

CONCLUSION

To be seen as the 'other' is deep-seated experience that affects a sense of self, or identity, subjectivity and one's social position, or categorisation in the society as member of minority or majority group. It is driven by power dynamics of unequal relationships, and can be reflected in interpersonal experiences of discrimination, racism, or collective identification. As willy-nilly imposed pan-African ethnic identity, 'African Australian' can be questioned for pragmatic (it does not address diversity of African migrants) and logical (that Africa is not a country to be used as people's ethnic identity) reasons as evidences supplied in this paper show. The author believes that both lines of argument have legitimate concerns and indeterminate application of the term should be reconsidered. It creates the vague yet simplified dual group that can easily be framed by 'us' vs. 'them' thinking such that the 'them' can be marginalised as 'others', strategically dispossessing their sense of belonging in Australia. In saying that, however, the phrase has also become an alternative identity embraced by some young people of African descent who subscribe to their 'African' identity.

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