Chapter 14
Mediating Identity and Culture:
Nigerian Videos and African Immigrants in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Using the media accessibility function from self-categorization theory, this study examines the role of the Nigerian video film in mediating the twin issues of culture and identity among African immigrants in the United States. Africans in diaspora constitute the majority of the transnational audience for Nigerian video films outside of Africa. Using a combined method of surveying and personal interviews, several African immigrants, their children, and friends living in the Dallas/Fort Worth area of Texas, USA were interviewed for their views on the role of the nascent Nigerian video industry in the way they sustain and straddle their multiple identities and culture in their society of settlement. Results indicate that most of the immigrants view the videos as affirmation of the values they grew up with and with which they still identify. This is in direct contradiction of professed cultural denigration they feel in their everyday professional lives in the United States. Most of the younger immigrants and first generation immigrants view these videos as a convenient way of accessing their Africanness as part of their multi-stranded identity and culture. Based on the expressed motivations for use and expressed outcome of use of the video-film, results indicate that the use of the video-film may have contributed to the accessibility of the African in diaspora label as a social category for this group of immigrants.

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African Immigrants in the U.S.

Africa is a vastly diverse continent with several countries with approximately one billion people (http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2009/2009wpds.aspx), and more than 2,000 languages spoken (www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/african_languages.htm). There are varying histories of colonization, civil strife, and political instability in each country. There are also differences in culture, ethnicity, traditions, religion, economic viability, and socio-cultural factors that have a significant impact on the needs of emigrants from each of these countries to the United States (Fanon, 1968). Despite the heterogeneity, sub-Saharan African immigrants often have similar needs based on a shared history and philosophy that includes "fundamental values and beliefs that permeate the continent of Africa, regardless of the diversity" (Young, 2003:166). Some of the shared history and philosophy emanated from the impact of colonialism on identity, including racism and discrimination that might be experienced in the new places of settlement. The experience of negotiating the conflicting messages between the African and Eurocentric worldviews cannot be overemphasized in the identity distortion of the African immigrant.

Of primary importance among the unique issues Africans face is that they have endured a long and complex history of colonialism and oppression, punctuated by the institution of enslavement by and a fight for freedom from Arab and European groups (Diop, 1974). The colonization period "led to Africa's loss of independence, loss of sovereignty, economic stagnation of the continent through colonialism, international humiliation, and the assumption of the inferiority of Africans and people of African descent" (Yansane, 1990:64). There are psychological and socio-psychological aspects of the historical legacy of colonialism and slavery relating to Africans that cannot be ignored (Appiah, 1992; Fanon, 1967).

However, African immigrants may be among the fastest growing immigrant populations in America. According to the 2000 US Census Bureau, there are over 1 million African foreign born in the United States in 2002-the 2010 census results for the population of foreign born Africans was not yet available at the time of this writing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2010 website (www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acs-11.pdf), a foreign-born is anyone who was not a U.S. citizen or U.S. national at birth. Non-U.S. citizens and those who have become citizens through naturalization are considered foreign born. More Africans have entered the United States voluntarily since 1990 than the total that disembarked as slaves prior to 1807, the year international slave trafficking was outlawed (Roberts, 2005). According to census data (as cited in Roberts, 2005, p. A1), the proportion of Black people living in the United States who described themselves as African-born more than doubled in the 1990s, and approximately 2 million U.S. residents identify their ancestry as sub-Saharan African.

African immigrants in the United States, much like other immigrants, often develop transnational ties to help nurture and ease the challenges of a dramatically different culture. These challenges may include negotiating ethnic and cultural identities in the confusing potpourri of race relations in the United States. They might also include economic marginalization as well as cultural denigration to some extent. Some of these challenges may be ameliorated by forming social networks to help tackle cultural denigration concerns having to do with socialization, gender roles and child rearing.

Many Africans are dynamic in their social construction of their identity in the United States while maintaining social and family ties in the home country. This study sought to assess the role of the nascent Nigerian video-film industry in the interplay of the multiple identities African

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