

# MIGRATION: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

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<b>Chapter Nine:</b>	
<b>Historical Narrative on the Migration of Bassa Nge People, 1821-1850</b>	<b>144</b>
Joseph Gimba Nasiru	
<b>Chapter Ten:</b>	
<b>Migration and Yoruba Identity: The Case of Ejigbo Experience in Abidjan since 1902</b>	<b>167</b>
Olalekan Henry Adebodun	
<b>Chapter Eleven:</b>	
<b>Contemporary Issues in Migration and Development in Nigeria</b>	<b>184</b>
Akanni Ibukun Akinyemi	
<b>Chapter Twelve:</b>	
<b>Migration Status, Adaptation and Risky Sexual Behaviour among Unmarried Women in Sub-Saharan African Countries</b>	<b>197</b>
Sarafa Babatunde Shittu, Titilayo Ayotunde & Sola Asa	
<b>Chapter Thirteen:</b>	
<b>The Dynamics and Challenges of Identity Construction in South Africa</b>	<b>217</b>
Dauda Busari & Itumeleng Meko	
<b>Chapter Fourteen:</b>	
<b>Migration, Diaspora Remittances and Human Welfare Indicators among African Countries</b>	<b>230</b>
Philip Ifeakachukwu Nwosa & Oluwadamilola Tosin Fasina	
<b>Chapter Fifteen:</b>	
<b>Civil Society and Migration Dynamics in Africa</b>	<b>250</b>
Akanni Ibukun Akinyemi & Adebusuyi Isaac Adeniran	
<b>Chapter Sixteen:</b>	
<b>Ethnic Mobilisation, Identity Politics and Resurgence of Irredentism in Africa: A Comparative Study of Separatist Movements in Nigeria and Cameroun</b>	<b>263</b>
Solomon Ayegba Usman & Ousman Mamakeh Bojang	
<b>Chapter Seventeen:</b>	
<b>Migrant Remittances and Socio-Economic Development of Akko Local Government Area, Gombe State, Nigeria</b>	<b>285</b>
Kim Idoma, Olasunkanmi Gabriel JeJe & Ibrahim Bello Hussaini	

## THE DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### **Introduction**

South Africa is a plural society as a result of the multi-racial nature of the community (Callard, 2014; Sisulu, 2002; Mandela, 1995). The history of South Africa is full of challenges of racial and ethnic crises associated with the apartheid epoch where the primary instrument of the division was racial identity or differences (Mhlahlo & Chacha-Mhlahlo, 2014). If well managed, this factor of ethnic diversity would have been a major asset to the South African state, but the contrary seems to be the case (Mwabu & Schultz, 1996). All the racial groups are seemingly exploiting South Africa's ethnic diversity in such a way that retards the nation's growth and progress (Kingdon & Knight, 2004; Posel, 2001). The construction of identity within and among different racial groups in South Africa have historically been momentous because the co-existence of the various racial groupings has been a thorny issue in the formation processes of nation-states in contemporary South Africa due to mutual mistrust among ethnic groups (Littrell & Nkomo, 2005). An important question in this context is whether and to what extent the aim of homogenisation of the population living within a state territory is feasible in South Africa (Verbelen, Gruber, & Dufrêne, 2007). It is also crucial to consider whether and to what extent racial diversity among other variables can be maintained within the country. The pervasive racial differences informed the arguments of Lange (2014) and Soudien (2013) to suggest that racial differences and ethnicity in South Africa are characterised

by mutual distrust and seeming exploitation, suspicion of deliberate administrative divide and rule policy, that have warranted the invention of identity-based construction, thus pitting the different racial groups against one another. According to the two scholars, this spans the epoch before, during and after apartheid and is now subtly practised across the nation. In other words, the challenge of racial differences in South Africa is better presumed regarding the competition among the ethnic groups in the country for the scarce resources available. It is in respect of this that Seekings (2008) argued that the national identity of South Africa seems to be a nation divided by racial groups, hence always in conflict.

The national predicament is seemingly negatively affecting the higher education system regarding how racial groups compete, sometimes acrimoniously, for the allocation and management of space in the institutions (Gibson, 2002, 2003). The competition among the diverse racial groups in South Africa for the control of the universities derives from the assumption that the universities play a significant role in elite formation and recruitment, in addition to the fact that the universities generate local employment and economic regeneration in the society (Anderson, Case & Lam, 2001; Posel, 2001; Lam, 1999; Dubow, 1995). Within this framework, racial groups in South Africa are sensitive to the general happenings regarding appointments, allocation of resources to the universities, and recruitment of staff, among others. In some cases, the people of the provinces where the universities are sited view the property as personal and would want them managed as such (Durrheim, 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Nattrass & Seekings, 2001; Wolpe, 1972).

However, to create a balanced and egalitarian state that is aimed at reassuring the people about the process of desegregation at the end of apartheid in 1994, a good number of legislations and policies were developed and tailored towards South African higher educational institutions. One of such legislations is the South African Schools Act (Act no. 37 of 1996) that was a by-product of the Bill of Rights and is entrenched in the Republic of South Africa's constitution ((Soudien, 2004; Anderson, Case & Lam, 2001). The bill as promulgated seeks officially to recognise the desegregation of schools in South Africa. The bill's primary objective was the creation of equal opportunities for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to attend schools of their choice. The core argument as proposed by the bill was that students, irrespective of racial orientation, would become integrated into the whole school environment, and the seed of a new society will be grown.

Despite these laws, there is still considerable opposition to policies aimed at eradicating racial disadvantage and segregation in the South African society. Sayed (2001) argued that though the policies established the process for the desegregation of schools to unfold principally by creating an avenue for members of different racial groups to mingle, they have failed to create the quality of such contacts in personal attitudes of students to each other so as to foster healthy relationships among the groups. Against this background,

schools in South Africa are “still grappling with the apartheid legacy of separate and unequal schooling” (Moletsane et al., 2004, p. 61) 18 years after the apartheid epoch ended. Therefore, the much needed social integration is lacking in most of the universities. Jansen (2014) posited that the universities in South Africa have continued to replicate the hegemonic dominance that characterised the pre-apartheid era and by so doing, encourage racial differences to flourish in the schools. Studies have also indicated that in an attempt to regain perceived lost power and privileges in a post-apartheid South Africa, students redefine their personal and collective racial identities to suit the groups or the interest they represent on campus.

Studies have explored how South African students make meaning of the idea of race (Vally & Dalamba, 1999; Dolby, 2001, 2002, 2010). Vally and Dalamba (1999) submitted that an overt form of racial practices and youth identity centred on the issue of “them” and “us” is rife among students of different racial groups in South Africa. Egwu (2011) argued that as a result, there are cases of conflict ‘generated by real or imagined differences in racial identity’ in South Africa. However, Dolby's studies also contended that the “ancestry” and “geography” factors are the crucial variables in the elaboration of racial identities.

The findings above show that institutional practices in South Africa’s higher education system are complicit in not creating an equal, fair and non-racist nation, despite the fact that various legislative and policy frameworks have outlawed racism in any form across all schools in the country. However, several scholars maintained that while opportunities are accorded to all, access to higher education and necessary interventions are not enough to change the racial polarisation (Mekua, 2015; Mafumo, & Divala, 2014; Craig & Leslie 2013). It is pertinent therefore to say that the challenges for reducing racial differences in South African higher institutions have typically focused on the traditional barriers related to the era of apartheid. While these difficulties remain, new and emerging challenges that encourage racial differences and identity construction and or reconstruction also exist. This paper will, therefore, attempt to take a closer look at the diversity and heterogeneity within the student’s organisation as well as scrutinise the impacts of such ‘rivalry within’ groups among various student associations. Accordingly, the paper seeks to investigate the nature of student relationships and interactions within the school, and also attempts to find the answer to the extent at which different racial groups have organised themselves to provide positive relations among students. This study will result in giving an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of racial/identity construction as it relates to the social relationships among different racial groups in higher educational institutions in South Africa by exploring the implications for integration among the racial groups.

## **Method**

The study utilised secondary sources of data that provided a good overview of the subject matter. The deployment of the approach was particularly useful as it provided key

references that helped galvanise the idea behind the dynamics of identity construction in South Africa.

### **Using Ecological, Sociocultural and Socio Constructionism Theories to Examine Racial/Identity Differences in Higher Institutions of Learning in South Africa**

This study mirrors the ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and integrative theoretical models (Garcia et al., 1996) that lay emphasis on the usefulness of considering interactions in the context in which individuals' develop, while the sociocultural theories stress the importance of heritage influences and the entire social structure when examining individuals' developmental experiences and the related family practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Wong & Hughes, 2006). In line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, the study conceptualises students' racial, or identity orientations as having a significant influence on interactions among people within and across different contexts – in this case between the students, their immediate families, and the political ideology they share. Here, it should be noted that the campuses of higher educational institutions in South Africa are a recruiting ground for almost, if not, all the political parties and various interest groups in the country. The campuses, aside from the accepted students' associations, also present an array of organisations that have links with the society as a whole.

For Sociocultural theory, the paper aligns itself with the primary postulation of the theory that documents differences exhibited by individual students. As a result, relevant experiences of families from different racial/ethnic groups offer their children views they hold on the other racial affinity (Garcia, et al., 1996). Understanding what experiences or prejudices or stories parents make available to their children will play a significant role in how they view colleagues and relate with them because cultural differences can be translated into different patterns of socialisation practices and their general behavioural attitudes to their colleagues.

Social Constructionism theory argues that the social world is constructed with humans in action, as individual in the society ascribe meanings to different actions, people, events, and things. Berger and Luckmann (1996) suggested that everyday reality is a socially constructed system that enables people to ascribe meaning to phenomena in a certain order of reality. This fact shares both subjective and objective features. Berger and Luckmann further argued that everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted subjectively by men. Identity, though created in the course of social interaction, acts back upon individuals and groups as though they were not involved in its creation. For example, racial groups in South Africa construct identities in the course of their interactions with other racial groups in their environment. It is, however, pertinent at this juncture to remember that the content of reality is inter-subjective in nature, and the composition of the identity of racial groups will naturally be made of significance to others. The argument is that identity is open ended, and since it is created through social interactions it can also be recreated in the course of social interactions based on the

interpretations that a racial group gives to the actions of other racial groups. Thus, the construction of identity is done in the course of social interactions and since individuals and groups need to interact with one another in society, it can be concluded that identities could be re-constructed based on the meaning the reconstruction has for the racial group. Historically, the racial groups in South Africa have had a pervasive reality of racial segregation as a result of the apartheid rule. The struggle by the people of South Africa to attain freedom was a vehicle of emancipation constructed by the 'blacks' to protest against their non-inclusion in South Africa's political structure and to resist the real or perceived 'white' hegemony (Seidman, 1999). Violence was used as a tool for the reconstruction of identity from the dominant group. The post-apartheid era has witnessed the resurgence of many racial groups which is a pointer that identities are being reconstructed with a high level of consciousness that sees racial groups not willing to accept that another race is superior to theirs, and this is creating a very subtle means of condensations which is a complete deviation from the violent approach used to gain freedom from the dominant group in the era of apartheid (Gibson & Claassen, 2010; Allanson, Atkins, & Hinks, 2002; Christopher, 2001; Mwabu & Schultz, 2000).

### **Theoretical Synthesis**

The ecological theory argued that socio-Constructionism amplifies the significance in the power of an individual to shape the society. The theory suggested that not minding the level of sediment social conditions, the conditions will still be able to produce, maintain and change through interpretive processes (Maines, 2000). Socio-Constructionism suggests that exposure of families to different racial backgrounds often informs the way children behave or act when they come in contact with different racial or ethnic groups (Garcia et al., 1996). The theory thus posited that experiences or prejudices inform the stories that families tell their children, which in turn determine how the children relate with colleagues and friends. These experiences form a significant part of the socialisation for the children which is imbibed in them and shapes their relationships with peers and forms their socially constructed attitudes. The social cultural theory explains that though the society is a creation of individuals, the community is still external to different persons, and it is an objective reality.

### **Constructing National Identity in a Divided Society: Conceptualising the Dynamics**

It is important to state what is meant by national identity in order to put it in proper perspective and understand the meaning of identity construction in a society with diverse racial identities. The term national identity can be seen to involve "a sense of political groupings that implies or established a definite social space and comprises of a fairly well demarcated and bounded territory" (Smith, 1991: 9 cited in Williams, 2010: 169). Smith, quoting Palmberg (1999: 10) argued further that the concept of national identity can also be "founded on culture" and "involves both cultural ideas (such as ideas on a shared history or ancestry), and cultural symbols (such as poetry, architecture, and monuments). To buttress Smith's argument, Keillor et al. (1996: 58) citing Herskovits (1948) explained that national identity could be "most parsimoniously defined as the extent to which a

given culture recognises and identifies with its 'cultural focus'. This means, "the tendency of all cultural groups to exhibit a greater variation in the institutions of some aspects of their lives than others so that these focal points can be used to characterise the whole culture." Therefore, for Keillor et al. (1996: 58), national identity is "a set of meanings developed and maintained by a particular culture that sets it apart from other cultures."

An elaborate clarification of the term "culture" as a concept is beyond the scope of this paper. The centrality to the definitions of the focus of the article (national identity) makes it necessary to emphasise that culture can be defined in terms of "its shared meanings or shared conceptual clarifications" (Hall, 1997: 18) or "semiotic practices" (Wedeen, 2002: 713). This interpretation and definition of the term culture thus "signifies what people experience as a distinctive way of life characterised in the subjective meanings given to cultural group members and expressed explicitly through some forms of behaviour (traditions, rituals, and customs) – both profane and sacred – that put spotlights on the daily, yearly, and life cycle rhythms of its members" (Berger, 1995 cited in Ross, 2009: 138). Ross (2009: 58) however suggested that it is important to emphasise the principles that bind people together, informs their "shared understandings that are found among people who have common or collective identity that differentiates them from others." It, however, should be noted that culture remains a highly nebulous concept but it must be pointed out that culture is not static, and that culture transcends intra-group relation with homogeneity of groups been deployed to differentiate groups.

Cultural representations in common ancestral, symbol, historical customs and heritage could sometimes be implemented to distinguish a group from another group. Notwithstanding this however, culture can sometimes be easily distinguishable in a homogenous society which claims to be 'a nation' where the construction of a 'sense of a community' suggests a more definite 'social space'. Hutchinson & Smith (1994), in their definition of national identity, argued that national identity in heterogeneous societies where several cultural groups co-habit can sometimes be challenging. Therefore, the understanding of the meaning of a "nation" as argued by several authors has differently and collectively engaged what constitutes a nation (Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1986; Brass, 1991; Greensfeld, 1992; Hutchinson & Smith, 1994; Eley & Suny, 1996; Anderson, 2006). The variations in the conceptualisation and definitions of what constitutes nation is a common tendency that can be construed. Moreover, even though it is possible to differentiate a political community as expressed in notions of citizenship from the cultural society as in shared symbols and understanding such as language, the reality is thus acknowledged in that political grouping is the makeup of different cultural groupings (Stone, 2002: 19- 20). That is, "both the majority and the minority states are moving towards a conception of national identity which is post-racial and multicultural" set on the foundation of the concept of 'nationalism' (Ipperciel, 2007: 397).

The explanations above buttress the existence of a nation, which suggests the life of political and cultural societies in a heterogeneous society. Homogeneous societies in the

modern world seek to construct ideas of "civic nations" defined as communities of 'equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political values and practices (Ignatief, 1993: p6; cited in Ipperciel 2007: p396). Therefore by extension, obligations to the 'set of political values" are often used to form the basis of the ideals of the social construction of culture as a symbol of mutual understanding that can serve as the foundation of building a national identity in modern nations.

### **The Nature and Dynamics of Identity Construction**

A vital and critical aspect of human existence is its identity. Racial or identical groups, Grande (2000) argued, were portrayed as homogenous and fundamentally different, possessing some innate and invariant structures and features that belong to a specific race or group. Elfert, Miguel, and Posner (2010) also advocated that the history of many societies is replete with the creation, emphasis and the manipulation of distinctions and boundaries between individuals and groups in the society. Identity is often used to construct, accentuate and in some isolated cases, it is used to contest various boundaries and distinctions by individuals and society. Howard (2000) and Cerulo (1997) submitted that earlier formations of identity portrayed are as given; it is permanent through life, and can be unchangeable irrespective of events in a social environment.

The works of George Herbert Mead, Berger & Luckmann, and Charles Cooley as suggested by Ashley and Orenstein (2007), Abraham (1982), Ritzer (2008), and Berger and Luckmann (1996) have an opposing interpretation of identity; their works pointed at a constructed, fluid and open-ended nature of identity. Their argument could be associated to the great global mutinies by individuals and groups, religions, racial and ethnic movements' contestations to construct and re-construct boundaries which have led to the creation of differences in the course of social interaction (Storr, 2009; Scholte, 1996). A point that needs to be stressed here is that the dynamism of identity is an indication of the fact that identity can be constructed and reconstructed depending on the social context through which it is looked at. This circumstance provoked Omobowale and Olutayo (2009:77) to attest to the fact that:

The construction of identity involves a combination of a social process which works together to attach contextual meanings to the evolved identity. As members gain interpretative understanding to the meanings attached to the constructed identity, they tend to de-emphasise their physical and social dissimilarities and rather accentuate their similarities and oneness.

In South Africa, the quest for a national identity among the people as members of a united country since the end of apartheid in 1994 have somehow remained elusive as racial suspicions and misgivings are embedded and reflected in all spheres of social life and have indeed, continued to polarise the citizens of the country. The higher education institutions are not an exception. Not surprising all policies after 1994 were directed in particular to redress the legacy of apartheid, to open access for marginalised groups of

the population and to ensure greater academic success among students and foster unity in the country.

### **Towards a Culture of Dialogue: Tolerance and Understanding in South Africa**

The preceding section makes the need for the nurturing of a culture of dialogue and understanding a major national project for South Africa. Suffice to ask what is "dialogue" and how do we want it applied to South Africa's multi-racial society?

Dialogue, as a social science concept, is derived from the Greek words "dia" and "logos". "Dia" means "through" or "with each other" while "logos" means "the name." Therefore, the concept of 'dialogue' can be defined as a free flow of information or meaning between people. In a multi-cultural society, it refers to an organic exchange of information between and amongst peoples of diverse ethnic or religious orientations in such a way that helps to break down stereotypes and poor understanding of how others think or perceive the world around them (Weimann 2004:19). The significance of dialogue in this respect is embedded in the fact that poor communication is one of the leading causes of identity conflict around the world. Weimann described how this type of conflict crystallises. He argued that:

The interpretation of the message that was received from someone else, the decoding of such message, will depend on the knowledge of the messenger. However, the reality that the message was formed or encoded is different from the reality that can be interpreted or decoded (Weimann 2004:23).

South Africa's example supports the above position. Dialogue can be seen as a collaborative exercise which requires the readiness of the interacting social actors. It is also voluntary; it cannot be forced on anybody. It requires trust, sincerity, and willingness to accept diversity in human nature. It entails collective reflections, learning and communication between groups and a tolerance of paradox (or opposing views), the suspension of judgment and empathetic listening. Its primary goal is to promote societal cohesion by making complex issues to be collectively explored (Isaacs 1993; McGinn 2004).

The dialogue in the context of higher education in South Africa refers to two main situations, which are the extent to which South African universities can encourage a healthy social interaction among the people of South Africa, especially by building capacity and the extent to which the university campuses can be said to be loci of interracial exchange. The achievability of these two objectives is much dependent on the degree to which the government can deal with the problem of identity or national challenges at the national level. However, this is as a result of the problems derived from the top. However, it is imperative to note that unlike what obtains in countries like Lebanon, Belgium, Cyprus, India, and Malaysia where comparable constitutional provisions and public policies exist, the South African constitution does not reserve or

allocate any shares for any designated racial groups. Thus, each group in the country adopts its peculiar self-help strategies to get what it considers its fair share of the national resources. The result is widespread suspicion among racial groups in the country, and this makes dialogue, tolerance, and understanding highly expedient in the country but difficult to attain in the racially segregated society.

The universities have significant roles to play in dealing with this problem. The universities in South Africa have been saddled with three important mandates which are the production of high-quality manpower to promote national and international development; to carry out cutting-edge research, and to engage in community service. The fact remains, however, that in the process of teaching and doing research, universities equally promote dialogue and understanding. Some intervention projects of South Africa's university establishment can be used to shed more light on this function.

To (or "intending to") mak(ing) South African universities a location for the promotion of dialogue, understanding, and tolerance, there should be a standing policy in the country for all universities to teach "Peace and Conflict Studies" to all first and second-year students. All students must take and pass the course. This goal, of course, will be done to make all graduates of South African universities to have a solid background in the knowledge of how to handle non-violently all forms of conflict they might encounter with other South Africans.

### **Conclusion**

The point made in this paper is that the South African society is divided by the factors of racial identity, and this works against the smooth running of the universities in the country, most especially regarding the appointment of staff, efficient administration of the institutions and the recruitment of students. All these will limit the extent to which the school system in the country could help promote the culture of dialogue, tolerance, and understanding in the society. The article interrogated the nature of the challenges but also attempted to underscore some modest efforts that some universities are making to still reach out to the people most especially regarding making significant contributions to peace building in the country.

The point was achieved in the presentation that the universities are merely a microcosm of the larger South African society and, within this framework; it is argued that the problems of racial groupings in them would not go away until the two challenges are played down at the national level. This can be achieved through the institutionalisation of the policy of true federalism and a culture of tolerance, most especially by the people who exploit racial tendencies for peculiar gains. This does not, however, mean that the universities themselves cannot solve the problems besetting them through in-house activities. These include the need for school administrators to put parochial sentiments apart, and see themselves, not as a representative of a particular section, racial groups as it often happens but as being the "fathers of all."

The administrators of the universities must place emphasis on meritocracy rather than mediocrity. Setting meritocracy in the administration of South African institutions will inform both students and staff to start to view their future as a function of how hardworking they are rather than a matter of sycophancy tied to ethnicity and religiosity. Universities must also organise regular seminars, workshops, and conferences that build bridges across racial divides.

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