

Being and Becoming Black

by *Choice Okoro*

The complexity of naming racial minorities in North America took on a unique spin recently with complaints by Republican Alan Keyes that Democrat Barack Obama-the son of a Kenyan immigrant-was wrongly claiming an African American heritage. Keyes, also an African American, dates his generation back to American slaves. In support of Obama, linguist John McWhorter argued that immigrants from Africa who are now residents of the United States have a stronger claim to the term "African American" than most American Blacks, whose connection to Africa is generations-old.

But while this may appear so, it is problematic to define racial identities solely by geographic origin. It would indeed be interesting to find a White South African immigrant using the term African American or African Canadian.

I have chosen to embrace the debate around naming the Black peoples now residing in North America and Western Europe as a source of strength. No matter where the debate goes or who drives it, I know who I am. I am an Urhobo woman, a Nigerian, a Black woman, a Nigerian Canadian, and an African Canadian; I am all these and more. That is the mystery, beauty, boldness, depth, and strength of "Blackness."

I am a Nigerian woman of the Urhobo indigenous group of the Delta, which is found in the southern part of Nigeria. I immigrated to Canada in 1997. While living in my country of origin, I thought of myself first as Urhobo first; as Nigerian second. On immigrating to Canada, the primary name of my identity became "Black." The joke among some of my friends from Africa is that we became Black when we immigrated to Canada and we usually stay Black until we speak-then we become Africans. In the company of other Africans, my Nigerian identity becomes slightly visible. I am-in the physical and geographical sense-an African Canadian. For many of my Black friends from the Caribbean who use the same term, it signals a sense of pride and the reclaiming of the origin of a collective racial identity. The term is as important to them as it is to me.

But when planning an event for the recent United Church consultation with people of African descent, I, along with others, opted for the name The Journeys of Black Peoples instead of The Journeys of Peoples of African Descent. While I am comfortable with both terms, and feel particularly grounded and most often prefer the use of the term "African" in referring to my racial identity, I opted for "Black" in this instance because the term would connect with the experiences of Africans in diaspora.

But I don't stay only Black for long. Once I speak, the question "Where are you from?" often follows; I have a distinctive African accent. I usually correct such questions with "You mean, where I am from originally?" and then proceed with pride to explain my background as an African born into the Urhobo ethnic group of Nigeria. I am aware that there is a strong racial implication in the question, as it infers that there is a race that makes a "true" Canadian. I know this, but I choose to answer these questions and explain my place of origin; being an African makes me a spiritually and emotionally healthier Canadian.

This article originally appeared in *Seeing Ourselves*, the Ethnic Ministries newsletter, Fall 2005.