


## Identities in Transition from Africa to Canada: Becoming Students

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Résumé de l'article

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## IDENTITIES IN TRANSITION FROM AFRICA TO CANADA: BECOMING STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*Students studying abroad are faced with challenges that impact their cultural, social, and economic identities, and this varies greatly depending on their home country and study destination. The transition and inter-cultural learning experiences of international tertiary students from African countries are currently under-examined. Afrocentric theory was employed to interpret the data derived from this qualitative study, which drew upon participatory action research and Photovoice methods to explore how African students navigate transitions to studying in Canada and the strategies they use for creating supportive social resources. As authors, co-researchers, and participants, we identified unique insights on how students build and maintain senses of connections, familiarity, and comfort when away from home, and how they conceptualize, create, and sustain community. These accounts provide insight for mentors, faculty, and policymakers in North American institutions on how they can offer opportunities for holistic learning, cultural integration, and access to valuable mentorship to help students navigate the complex journey of transition.*

**KEY WORDS:** African students; Afro-centric philosophy; Inter-cultural learning; International students; Participatory action research; Photovoice

## INTRODUCTION

### ***Transitioning***

*I'm accepted to pursue my MBA (Master of Business Administration)*

*No, they said, I don't believe it!*

*Yes, it's true*

*No, they said, A full scholarship?*

*That's too good to be true!*

*I see my mother's worried face. She's happy yet torn. We're a low middle-income Botswanan family. This news is a burden.*

*The costs of my dream, her dream, our dream, sifts through her body.*

*A full scholarship?...*

*My mother remembers my grandmother struggling to cover school fees for her children- A loving sacrifice.*

*Yes, it's a full scholarship!*

*In a country, far from home-Canada!*

*How is this possible? Something big needs to give for this to happen!*

*Sure enough, there were many hurdles to get here*

*A country-wide lockdown-*

*No Canadian Embassy in Botswana-*

*How to get a visa? Visa delays!*

*Crossing the Botswana border to South Africa*

*Hustling to find transport to Johannesburg.*

*Uncertain times...*

*Three days of travel*

*Finally arrived*

*So many setbacks*

*I'll make the journey count!*

This poem "Transitioning" is a story of becoming that begins even before leaving a home country. Written by one of the co-authors as part of our Photovoice research project, it highlights the challenges of many students who decide to leave their home country to attend higher education elsewhere. In fact, the number of international and foreign tertiary students has grown over the years at an average of 5.5% per year between 1998 and 2019 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). Among international students, Canada is one of the top destinations with over 621,565 international students in the year 2021, and is a top study destination for African students (Nuthall, 2021; Statista, 2021). Leaving home to attend higher education as an international student offers both challenges and opportunities. Students move, not through fixed or pre-determined levels of adjustment, but instead through layers of complexity that begin well before their arrival at

the host institution. As the poem above reveals, the journey can begin with the decision to study outside home country borders and can require simultaneously navigating multiple cultural contexts. This transition is therefore not linear, and individuals acquire cultural knowledge, values, and behaviors through exposure, experience, and reflection (Gu et al., 2010). The journey also reveals power dynamics and inequalities through various direct interactions between international students and the host culture in which they find themselves. This process of adjustment and transition therefore leads to intercultural learning.

#### LITERATURE

Ovie and Barrantes (2021) draw upon Stefan's (2019) conceptualization of intercultural as "the recognition of values, ways of life, and symbolic representations" (p. 2) that are developed. Intercultural learning in this sense is viewed as multi-dimensional, interactive, dynamic, embodied and reciprocal, while intercultural identity involves seeing oneself navigate more than one cultural context at the same time. Learning in higher institutions for international students; and specifically African international students can be a blend of challenges and new experiences that require a lot of adjustments and learnings (Akoth & Enoksen, 2022; Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Evivie, 2009; Hanassab, 2006; Irungu, 2013; Lee & Opio, 2011; Okusolubo, 2018). Intercultural learning and adaptation are one of the critical adjustments required for international students to be able to navigate their new academic and social environment (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Girmay, 2017; Maundeni et al., 2010; Montgomery, 2010; Pruitt, 1978). For international students, intercultural learning can involve learning to keep part of oneself in the home culture while at the same time opening-up the self to be part of the host country's culture. Ambrósio et al. (2019) and Akoth and Enoksen (2022) highlight some of the hindrances that come with such learnings including language barriers, vulnerability and social exclusion, a new appreciation for home, as well as adjusting to new contexts, new places and a new educational system. Ambrósio et al. (2019) further classified these adjustments and intercultural learnings into two main categories; those related to academic adjustments and those related to social adjustments. These adjustments oftentimes require a negotiation of cultures and identity or re-evaluating one's understanding of what 'home' means.

However, learning across cultures can be experienced quite differently depending on where students call home and where they intend to study. A literature review on the mobility of international students conducted by Haider (2017) reported that international students of non-European ancestry faced more challenges and discrimination in the "Global North" compared to those international students whose home country had similar cultures to the host destination country. Some students can be made into strangers, being seen institutionally and individually "as out of place" or feeling like "the one who does not belong" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 2). Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche shared an experience of cultural shock describing her new life as a university student in the United States as *becoming black*: "I became black in America, and I really hadn't thought of myself as black in Nigeria" (Adichie, 2018). Therefore, moving from a dominant to a non-dominant cultural identity can shape intercultural learning. As such international students are not one group,

and their demands of adjusting to new cultural contexts can vary (Noregia & Justin, 2020). Although international students may share similar experiences such as moving to a new city, adjusting to differing academic demands and environments, and leaving family and friends behind, students may experience new, multidimensional, and complex intercultural contexts differently, and their personal experiences navigating the journey, as well as their strategies and resources for living and learning in a host country may also differ. This means that homogenizing international students hides the cultural diversity across groups (countries, communities, languages, race, and gender) as international students come from varied backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

Currently, literature on international student experiences focuses more on students from specific geographic areas such as Asian countries (Dai, & Garcia, 2019; Heng, 2016; Martinez-Callaghan & Gill-Lacruz, 2017), and some include international students from Pakistan (Haider, 2017) and from European countries (Nada, Montgomery, & Araújo, 2018; Ploner, 2017). Others also group all international students as “foreign” students without distinguishing between students from different cultural groups or different geographic areas (Gu et al., 2010). While there is a dearth of literature focused on African-international students studying abroad, some authors describe many of the adjustment concerns faced by African-international students in the UK, USA, and Europe as constraining, and include; feelings of isolation, alienation and loneliness, homesickness, financial pressures, prejudice and discrimination, and identity negotiation, particularly in contexts where they may be a minority (Akoth & Enoksen, 2022; Boafo-Arthur 2014; Noreiga & Justin, 2020; Nwokedi, 2020; Okusolubo, 2018). Other authors also contextualize the different phases African-international students go through in their new host country; an initial phase is characterized by financial, social and emotional challenges, a transitional phase where they seek support from other students, religious groups, student associations, host families, and engage in activities and become part of certain communities, and a final settling phase where they are able to mobilize individual and social resources for coping and independence (Akoth and Enoksen, 2022; Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014; Noreiga & Justin, 2020; Okusolubo, 2018). Previous studies in the UK and USA also highlight that many challenges faced by African-international students start before departure from their home country. These challenges include immigration and visa issues, poor pre-arrival information on economic and social resources, cultural expectations, and other vital resources for successful integration in the host country (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Okusolubo 2018).

While there has been a continuous increase in the number of international students enrolling in institutions located in North American countries like Canada, the experience of some students, in particular African students, and how they negotiate this transition along with their intercultural learning, is largely under-examined (Noreiga & Justin, 2020). Thus, there is a strong need for more dialogue on international African students and their experiences of transition, so that institutions can create more inclusive spaces for them (Noreiga & Justin, 2020). Furthermore, African international students’ adjustments to transitions can differ based on region and cultural geographies (Mwangi et al., 2019). The experience of an African student transitioning to a university in China (Wu & Hou, 2024) will be quite different from

transitioning to a university in North America. Furthermore, apart from very few auto-ethnographic literatures, we were unable to find studies that explored this transition from the perspective of African international students themselves. Although African students comprise a growing proportion of international students studying at Canadian universities, we found limited reports or documentation of the unique transitional experiences of African students. How might African international students, now studying at the University of British Columbia deepen their own understanding of transitions so that they can participate in making and implementing the kinds of changes needed to support them? Hence this study addresses this gap and explores the main question: How do international tertiary students from African countries navigate challenges in transitions to studying in a North American institution in Canada and what strategies do students use for creating supportive social resources? In this paper, we specifically focus on the themes of home and community with sub-research questions 1) How do African international students keep threads of home visible and relevant in a new cultural context? and 2) How do African international students conceptualize, create, and sustain community in a host country?

### **AFROCENTRIC THEORY**

We draw upon Afrocentric theory to frame our study of African students' experiences transitioning as international students to a Canadian university. Afrocentricity is a form of scholarship that puts traditional African knowledge and values at the center of its analysis (Dei, 2000). It "establishes a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person" (Asante, 1991, p. 172). Afrocentricity's core agenda is to place people of African origin in control of their lives and attitudes about the world. In other words, it is a standpoint upon which Africans use to scrutinize each facet of their disruption or dislocation whether it relates to their culture, psychology, economics, health, or religion. As an intellectual theory, Afrocentricity is the study of the ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as the key players rather than victims of various events or issues (Asante, 1991, p. 172).

Yaro (2021), drawing upon the work of Dixon (1977), examines Afrocentric theory alongside Euro-American worldviews. Whereas Euro-American worldviews emphasize individualism, African-centred worldviews emphasize the holistic relationships between humans, nature, and the supernatural. Neither one nor the other is more important—all are interconnected. Yaro (2021) writes: "the individual is a non-existent being without the community or the collective society. Who you are comes as a result of your relationship with community" (p. 53). African-centric theory emphasizes a symbiotic relationship between individual and community where individuals care for the community as much as the community cares for individuals. For example, differing from many Euro-American perspectives, African families value other adults in the community as care-givers or parents for their children meaning that each child's education is the responsibility of the community.

Afrocentricity is founded on four main pillars of inquiry that include the dimensions: cosmological, axiological, epistemological, and aesthetics (Asante, 1991). The cosmology dimension of Afrocentric inquiry considers the role of culture and how Africans understand,

experience, and interact with the universe. The Axiological dimension delves into values and ethics in seeking truth, while the aesthetic dimension seeks the understanding of the good and beautiful in human experiences. The epistemological dimension concerns how knowledge is created and what constitutes proof. From an African standpoint there is no separation between object/subject and therefore no separation between researcher and researched, between the knower and the known (Asante, 1991; Mazama 2001; Mkabela 2005; Somjee, 2020).

Karenga (1998) identifies seven core cultural African characteristics: (i) the centrality of the community, (ii) respect for tradition, (iii) a high level of spirituality and ethical concern, (iv) harmony with nature, (v) the sociality of self-hood, (vi) veneration of ancestors, and (vii) the unity of being. He terms these African cultural characteristics as “shared orientations” (Karenga, 1998, p. 4). These key characteristics featured significantly during our discussions and although there were differences in how co-researchers verbalized experiences with these characteristics, there were many underlying similarities.

While addressing school curriculum issues, Dei and McDermott (2019) also called for substantive engagement with African cultural stories to improve educational experiences. Thus, rather than more universal theories and perspectives of intercultural learning we were drawn to Afrocentric theories rooted in African cultural experiences, as we wanted co-researchers to tell their own stories ensuring the inclusion of all the nuances of the African perspective. Given the tenets of this theory, it is a perfect fit for our research questions and the Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Photovoice methodological approaches employed.

## METHODS

Guided by Afrocentric theory that values holism and collectivity, we drew upon participatory action research (PAR), and more specifically Photovoice methods, to inquire into the experiences of university students transitioning from various African countries to study at a Canadian university. “Only participatory research creates the conditions for” a community to understand and identify their unique needs and develop ways to transform their practices to meet such needs (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 5). Following others, we position Photovoice as a form of PAR methodology (Lam et al., 2020; Stack & Wang, 2018). PAR and Photovoice methods allowed for international African student participants to tell their stories of transition from their perspectives rather than through the interpretation of an outside researcher. The aim of participatory action research is to understand rather than dominate the social world of participants and therefore focuses on conducting research *with* the community rather than *on* or *for* the community. This collaborative and participatory approach disrupts the role boundaries of researchers and participants. Thus, in this study all participants took on the roles of co-researchers and participants of the study at the same time, and all collaborated as co-authors of this paper. Our team of eight people consisted of six graduate students from African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, and Botswana) studying at the same Canadian university, as well as one graduate research assistant (GRA) from Kenya, and a Canadian university faculty member.

Our collaborative research was guided by principles of PAR that emphasized: 1) ethical reflexivity, which is essential in working across cultures and contexts; 2) shared and mutual concerns and consequences (i.e., supporting students' personal and academic wellbeing); 3) inclusivity (i.e., a research team composed of faculty and students together, where participants are co-researchers); 4) both knowledge production and action are goals for change and improvement; and 5) flexibility to incorporate multiple research methodologies. In our study participants became co-researchers who participated in data collection and, to the extent desired, data analysis and reporting. We recognize the varied and numerous approaches to PAR practices including action research that is technical, practical or emancipatory (Kemmis et al., 2014). Similar to Cornish et al., (2023) our PAR approach included these aspects: building relationships and establishing ways of working together; establishing a common understanding of the issue (experiences of transitioning to new academic environments as an African international student studying at a Canadian university); generating data and collaborative data analysis through cycles of inquiry (phases of Photovoice that included reflection and analysis); and then planning and taking action.

### **Context and Participants**

Our collaboration began through a project titled "Identities in Transition" for which the faculty member was the lead investigator. All African international graduate students funded through a sponsored Scholars Program attending the University of British Columbia were invited to participate in the study. The Scholars Program provides scholarships to academically outstanding students from African countries who experienced economic marginalization. Six students of the Scholars Program agreed to participate in the study. These students were completing master level graduate degrees in various departments such as Business, Health, and Land and Food Systems at the University of British Columbia, and had lived in Canada as students for about two years or less. Only the faculty member and the GRA had worked on previous projects together before the research began. Following institutional research ethics approval, the study was initiated with two focus group meetings in which the faculty member and the GRA explained the goal of the research and the invitation for participants to join as co-researchers to explore individual and collective experiences of navigating the journey from home to Canada as international students. All six participants agreed to be involved in various degrees of the project as co-researchers. This meant participants helped co-chair focus group meetings, analyze data collected during meetings, and participate in actions for change such as presenting findings to international audiences. The GRA drew upon his own African cultural background and research experiences to support data collection and analysis. The faculty member, with experience in PAR and Photovoice methods, helped guide participants in becoming co-researchers. To distinguish the various roles, in this paper we use the term "co-researchers" to refer to the six participants, and "we" to refer to the research team that includes the six participants, the GRA, and the faculty member. This article is an example of one of the outcomes of our collaboration. As a team we collaboratively contributed to analyzing the data, engaging in a literature review, discussing the content, and writing or editing sections of the paper.



### Data Collection

We used the method of Photovoice as an elicitation device to facilitate the process of exploration of the students' transition from their home countries to Canada. Photovoice allows co-researchers to use photography as their voice to engage in storytelling of their experiences and empowers them to make social change (Wang, 2006). Photovoice complements PAR and aligns with Afrocentric perspectives with a focus on participants engaging as co-researchers in documenting experiences, exploring stories, and engaging in reflective analysis. The exploration in which the stories and photographs are developed through Photovoice can then be shared with the public and decision-makers to initiate change.

Over a period of 10 months, we conducted 15 focus groups via video conferencing technology (Zoom), with each meeting being 2-3 hours in length. We structured focus groups meetings in similar fashion to Freire's (1970/2000) dialogue circles and we engaged in open communication that involved critiquing our ideas and assumptions. In an introductory meeting, co-researchers discussed Photovoice as a research method, the ethics of being co-researchers and taking and sharing photos, as well as strategies for taking and collecting compelling photos. In subsequent meetings, co-researchers collected data (photos with accompanying storied text including poetry) and drew upon their own experiences around the broad themes of home, community, and transition using the following questions:

- Home: Imagine you are telling your story of being an international student from Africa using photographs, how do you keep hold of home so that you can continue to live it while away from home?
- Community: Take pictures related to community, when taking your photos keep the following idea in mind: Think about the main strengths of your community and challenges in your community.
- Transition: Take images of things that are relevant to your "movement" between cultures and between spaces, what kind of things from your own cultural background have you brought into this space?

During our Photovoice discussion meetings, co-researchers took turns sharing their photos with the team and explaining why they had taken that photo, what it meant to them, how it related to the themes of home and community, as well as connections they noticed to other co-researchers' images. During the beginning meetings, the faculty member employed facilitative skills and strategies that allowed co-researchers to express and explore their feelings and experiences in a collaborative and dialogic manner. As the meetings progressed, the co-researchers shared facilitation of the meetings and all team members participated in sharing their insights related to the similarities and differences they noticed across the co-researchers' experiences. Facilitation questions included: What do we see here in this photo? What is happening in this photo? What does the photo mean to you? How do you see the photo as reflecting the theme of Home or Community?

Following the iterative nature of qualitative research, emergent issues from one meeting inspired questions for the next meeting. Our dialogues provided opportunities for both data collection and analysis with the movement of our ideas, assumptions, and responses/reactions to each other's thoughts, stories, poetry, and photo sharing being more recursive than linear. The poem that opened this paper is an example of such storied data. All discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. In summary, our data included audio recorded transcripts of all meetings, photos taken and shared during the meetings, as well as narratives, stories, and poetry of co-researchers' interpretations and dialogue that accompanied interpretations of the photos.

### **Data analysis**

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously through cycles of inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although ensuring confidentiality in focus groups meetings was not possible, co-researchers were asked to respect the privacy of issues discussed within meetings. Furthermore, to maintain some form of confidentiality for this paper, co-researchers each decided on their own set of two-alphabet pseudonym initials, with all pseudonyms ending with the letter P, to be used in the reporting of results.

All focus group meetings were transcribed and available to all members of the team. The faculty member guided and mentored co-researchers in analyzing focus group transcripts. Co-researchers came with varied experience in qualitative data analysis; some had experience with thematic analysis of qualitative data while others had very little experience. We began with each team member individually reviewing each meeting transcript multiple times. We then met as a team to discuss what we noticed in the transcripts and the words or phrases that reflected co-researchers' experiences. This step was followed by another round of analysis with co-researchers working together in a shared document to highlight and identify patterns in the transcripts (Miles et al., 2014). Emerging themes and their definitions were formed by grouping similarities and differences in co-researchers' experiences, and these themes were brought back during subsequent focus group meetings for all co-researchers to review and revise as needed. For example, initial themes for the focus on 'home' included: time, natural environment, cultural practices and materials, family and people with similar backgrounds, food and embodied connections, and spaces as reminders/re-creating home. Themes for 'community' included building relationships and belonging, developing community supports, seeking new experiences as an explorer, well-being, connections to place and feeling out of place, and perceived superficial kindness. Through multiple iterative discussions, these were collapsed into the themes presented in this paper.

Even in these meetings, in which we discussed our analysis of themes, we recorded our discussions providing multiple layers and opportunities for analysis. Given our focus on the experiences of African international tertiary students, we opted for this form of analysis because we wanted to consciously and systematically practice as well as value African ways of being, feeling, thinking, and studying that centred on both individual experiences and community experiences. Co-researchers drew upon their own cultural experiences and

understandings of Afrocentric theory to ensure that resulting themes were interpreted through the lens of Afrocentric theory (Dei, 2017; Mazama, 2001).

## RESULTS

Our analysis identified two broad themes. The first theme, "Threading Home Away from Home," describes how African international tertiary students seek, build, and maintain senses of familiarity, comfort, and connections, to home while away from home, and entails three sub themes: 1) relationships here and there; 2) valuing what you have at home - African food and fashion; and 3) identifying with and exploring places. The second broad theme, "Conceptualizing, Creating, and Sustaining Community," describes how African international tertiary students navigate community in their new environment, and has three sub-themes: 1) community and sense of belonging; 2) connecting to stories of colonization and maintaining identity as part of a community; and 3) learning and adapting to sustain community.

### Threading Home Away from Home

#### *Relationships Here and There*

"The building is not the home" was a common thought shared among co-researchers as they tried to sustain, build, and create relationships in their new environments. For some, this included re-creating home by maintaining and keeping connections to family and friends in their home countries while at the same time connecting through photos to relive memories. For some, this included creating and building new relationships with others in their new environment and connecting to other Africans while in Canada.

Keeping home alive in their minds and hearts was of upmost importance especially as the COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted travel and holiday plans. One strategy to keep *home* alive, was to engage the sense of sight. Photos in dorm rooms, wallets, phones, and working spaces elicited memories. Explaining the photo wall collage of family and friends in her room, NP explained:

I was really missing home. I still felt disconnected because it's not so easy moving thousands of miles away from home. But then, COVID happened and then I couldn't go home for the summer. I decided maybe I need to actually do something in my room that reminds me of home and the people I love so much, and also the connections I've built here. -NP

Images and photos also served as a source of strength and support for co-researchers, as they navigated new terrains. Describing the significance of the photo of her family on her work desk, MP stated, "I just look at them and I'm like, 'Okay, I'm doing this for you', ...when it gets tough, you just look at [the family photo] and kind of draw inspiration from it".

Equally important was the need to build new relationships and connections in a new city and institution. Most described the warm and pleasant feelings they felt when they connected with friends, scholars, work, and school colleagues who were Africans. Finding that cultural

connection was a safe space and provided a sense of comfort and support, as they shared similar journeys, ideologies, sense of humour, and belief systems. Although co-researchers acknowledged the many differences across African countries, they did acknowledge their shared experiences of being African as a threaded connection.

Even though we come from different African countries, there are certain things you know, that when you share with someone who is not African, they are just not going to get it, and this has a way of bringing us together. -MP

Also given that most co-researchers came from close knit large families with many aunts, uncles, and children, being around families in a new city provided a sense of connection to home. These relationships with African peers and families not only provided shared connections of home, but was also served as a support system, because there was a shared understanding of the transition process. OP noted, “just the people that I know I can count on and [know they] can always be there for me when I need them”.

### ***“Valuing What You Have at Home”: African Food and Fashion***

For all co-researchers, connections to home were sustained through African food and fashion. These two factors were described as important aspects of their African culture and identity. African food and fashion items were very expensive in Canada and not easily available and accessible in their new environment. This created an increased sense of value and appreciation for items from home and pointed to aspects of home that they had previously taken for granted.

All co-researchers placed a high value on their local foods and emphasized the important role of food in their African culture, describing it as “culture is basically built into the kind of different food you find across different ethnic groups” (KP). Seeing certain food items in their new environment reminded them of family members that loved those kinds of foods, and for others engaging in communal cooking for celebrations and events reminded them of cooking with family back in their home countries. Many described the significance of food as a connection to home. KP gave an example of her interactions with other Africans: “I talked to some Africans around here and I asked them like, ‘What would you really like to have close to you to feel at home?’ Most of us, it’s all about the food”.

For co-researchers, becoming accustomed to food recipes in the Western culture was challenging and, in many situations, learning to enjoy another cultural food or not having access to familiar comfort food, was a source of frustration, especially when faced with the stress of graduate school. Some co-researchers actively sought African food in nearby cities, as some mentioned the smell and taste of African foods became a major source of excitement and comfort, especially when they felt fatigued and anxious. For others, a special connection to home was felt when they ate African food communally with other Africans in gatherings and celebrations.

I think one of the most difficult things that happened moving here was getting used to the food. Graduate school is frustrating. You're stressed out, and then, what calms me down and makes me feel good is food. This is the Nigerian Jollof rice. It's one of the placeholders that keeps home in my heart. Whenever I'm down, I just order this and eat and I feel good.-NP

Another fascinating piece of identity and culture was African fashion. Focus group conversations on African fashion centred on wearing items such as African fabrics, beaded bracelets, and necklaces as a way of connecting and remembering home. Wearing these pieces of fashion gave a sense of identity to a particular place or country in Africa. Speaking on the significance of their beaded wristband made with the colours of the Kenyan flag, RP noted:

Almost all Kenyans and here and even back home, this is what identifies them, the flag. It reminds me of home...Everywhere I move on campus, "Are you Kenyan?" That's the question I always wanted somebody to ask me because it reminds me of home. -RP

The African traditional fabric which comes in different colours, styles, and textures, and popularly worn for different occasions such as weddings, birthdays, and a popular Friday outfit in their home countries, was a way for co-researchers to showcase their identity and remember home. Most described how they easily stood out in the Canadian crowd. Wearing African fabrics allowed co-researchers to showcase the identity of their home countries. In describing this, one co-researcher noted how they always received compliments from others whenever they wore the Nigerian African fabrics for events, work, and classes:

One of the ways I stay connected to home is wearing African print. Right here in this picture, I'm wearing an African print. Back home when you wear African print, ...everyone wears African print, so you don't stand out. Anytime I wear it here, it always stands out. I get lots of compliments and it makes me feel good and it just reminds me of home. -NP

### ***Identifying With and Exploring Places***

Another way co-researchers built senses of familiarity and connections to their new environments was through identifying similar interests and places and exploring them. Co-researchers drew comparisons between their new environments and their home countries and identified what was similar and familiar in both contexts and drew upon these similarities as connections to home. This included engaging in similar activities and interests, creating spaces, and visiting places that offered important markers for connections to home. Some co-researchers identified the need to re-create similar workplaces they had in their home countries.

I always have a workspace myself back at home. And now, I also have a workplace which always reminds me of my workplace at home. I also take my breakfast on it too, my dinner, my lunch, everything, and it always reminds me of home. -QP

Partaking in similar activities or visiting places that they would have done in their home countries strengthened the threaded connections to home. Most co-researchers spoke about their faith and spirituality, and how the church became one of the places that offered a unique connection to home as the concept of church was universal irrespective of location. They described feeling grounded by their faith and saw the church as a place to build friendships with those of similar beliefs and as a place of refuge.

I don't feel so different because it's like the same setting that's back home. So, it felt like I was actually in another “home” and anytime I felt like I was struggling, it was just one of those spaces where I would just go sit and just reflect. Spending time there actually always made me feel better. -NP



**Image 1.** NP, “Catholic church”

Others spoke about threading connections through partaking in sporting activities and other gatherings and celebrations that brought people together, such as birthdays, welcome parties, naming ceremonies, and events that marked African festivals and celebrations. Street festivals in Canada, for example, were sought for their similarities to art and dance festivals in Ghana. Some of these places provided opportunities for informal dialogue and spaces for socialization to talk about their personal and professional experiences with friends and colleagues. Describing the similarity of the conversations that happen in such places in their home countries, SP explained the significance of a photograph that showed them and their friends eating communally.

When I look at this photo, it reminds me a lot of things about home, not just the food. It reminds me of how we like to sit at different places and talk about life. So just outside of my home, we have this kind of space where usually on the weekends, on a Saturday, with the guys usually come sit there usually after we go for hiking or for jogging in the morning. We sit down and talk about life and talk about everything. About the past, about the present and our future expectations and what have you. -SP

As co-researchers were from sub-Saharan African countries, aspects of the physical environment were important markers and connections to home. Co-researchers compared the climate of their home countries to that of their new city in Canada and noted the cold climate and rain were challenging. They described the best days as those that had bright and sunny weather, and the sun's warmth created a feeling of home. For OP, watching the sunset and sunrise was an important connection, as this was described as an activity that was done with family members in their home country.

The sunset is just something that I like to view at home. Anywhere I go, this is just something that I watch to really just take me back home and remind me of my family. -OP

For some co-researchers, aspects of the physical environment such as rocks and vegetation which underlined their professional interests and experiences in their home countries were sought after and explored in their new environment. Visiting museums and seeing rocks from different parts of the world reminded them of their field and professional experiences, which ignited feelings of home. QP explained, "I always feel excited about rocks. I saw different rocks from different places, which reminds me of home, my field experiences I've had over time".





**Image 2.** *QP, "Visiting the Museum"*

### **Conceptualizing, Creating, and Sustaining Community** ***Community and Sense of Belonging***

Transitioning to an unfamiliar Canadian context provided opportunities for co-researchers to conceptualize and form new communities, and in some instances, this involved transitioning from an introverted to a more extroverted personality or identity, by actively seeking to reach out and connect with others in the new environment. On one level, community represented familiarity in terms of shared cultural values, nationalities, and identity, and on another level co-researchers recognized the need to embrace and explore broader understandings of community. They acknowledged and appreciated the explorative opportunities and diversity that Canada provided such as the varied cultures, ethnicities, professional capacities and ideologies. Co-researchers set out to expatiate and build communities outside of their immediate cultural identities. They began to experience new cultures, bonded with new people, tried new activities, and became more versatile. Describing the need to move beyond their own cultures, to further build a sense of belonging and experiences, OP stated;

If you leave your country and try to integrate into a country like this [Canada] that has many cultures if you don't take the effort to appreciate other cultures then, you're still back where you were, you're not really experiencing anything. – OP

Co-researchers identified with multiple overlapping communities based on their goals and the activities they engaged in. This included graduate program academic cohort communities, the Scholar Program community, professional organization communities, religious communities, and community service and volunteer communities. In addition to



being sources of new experiences and connections, communities were also seen as important sources of strength and a network for support.

We talk about everything, share opportunities, jobs, internships ... we celebrate birthdays and baby showers... we've created a very strong bond, that doesn't make us feel we're really lacking that connection from home. -NP

In getting to explore their new environment, co-researchers sought new recreational activities, such as hiking, ice curling, skating, skiing, bowling, and escape games. These activities provided opportunities for learning more about themselves as well as bonding with others who shared similar interests and hobbies. SP stated, "you need to have a community so you can engage in some of these things [activities and recreation that's available] and that makes it fun ...doing it alone is boring".

Beyond engaging in extra-curricular activities, co-researchers wanted to learn and build their knowledge, skills, and careers, thus they also sought membership of professional associations and scientific communities, which provided the opportunity for knowledge sharing, mentorship, and networking.

I was really excited, I met a lot of professionals in the industry, within mining, hydro oil and gas, I was amazed, I could really connect to these people. Aside from career advice, I also learnt other soft skills, like networking. -QP

In a bid to also improve themselves and continue the community-service endeavors they did in their home countries, co-researchers volunteered with organizations around and beyond the university. Volunteering included activities such as teaching and farming, and these provided opportunities to explore new community-building that was quite different from their home contexts. Volunteering in certain organizations also provided opportunities to (re)story conceptions of who can participate in communities. Co-researcher KP, for example, shared a story of how in their home country there exists a noticeable divide between those who own farms (the wealthy) and those who do the farming (the poor).

I started volunteering at the farm, where I was doing all these exciting jobs. It was a whole new feeling for me...And I remember the first time I took this picture and I put it on my WhatsApp Status, my family back at home were like, "Are you farming in Canada?" I was like, "Yeah. Like this is a big deal. I'm doing this with doctors and professors... It feels good to feel that this thing that is underrepresented back at home is actually valued here...I feel welcomed in this very small group. -KP



**Image 3.** KP, "Farming in Canada"

***Connecting to Stories of Colonization and Maintaining Identity as Part of a Community***

Co-researchers reflected on the history of western colonization of Indigenous communities and African countries and drew parallels between the colonization stories in Canada and that of their home countries. These stories of colonization further spurred discourse on the need to maintain and preserve their identities as they were forming new communities. They noted the long-term effects of colonization which were still reflected in the struggles and challenges faced by Indigenous and African communities. Co-researchers highlighted how the massive poles carved by Indigenous artists and raised on their university campuses served as environmental reminders of not only reconciliation between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities of Canada, but also how the poles served as visual cues which revealed cracks of imperfection in their vision of Canada.

You see some of the struggles, you see some of the history behind what has gone on, and it reminds me that no matter how perfect you think one place is, they still have their story. –SP

For some co-researchers it was important to become knowledgeable about Indigenous communities. These students actively sought to engage in activities to build personal knowledge on Indigenous history as they saw it as vital to learning more about their new environment. The discourse on colonization was further associated with preserving identities, as co-researchers noted the need to be aware of the interplay between being part of a community and forming identities. They noted that navigating new diverse communities required attention to cultural values and identities. Importantly, co-researchers highlighted that participating in new cultures did not mean giving up their personal cultures, values, and individuality.

You need to be tactful and intelligent to navigate your way, trying to make sure you learn new things, but still owning your niche, in terms of what you think you represent and what you stand for. Because for me, if you totally ignore your position, or your stance, or your identity, I feel like you've not fully adjusted to the environment, and you're not fully present. -SP

Further still, co-researchers emphasized that participating in new cultures did not mean ignoring their own culture in order to fit into their new environment. It was noted that the new communities created in Canada could not replace the communities they had in their home countries. Co-researchers emphatically used the word “village” to describe the concept of their community in their home countries and how the concept of “village” was irreplaceable. Co-researcher MP articulated this difference between the community in Canada and the community in her home country stating:

There's my community, and there's my village, and no matter what, my community [in Canada] cannot replace my village. So, my village stands for my background, my identity, and everything. And community [in Canada] is the new relationships, and new nature and everything. -MP

Co-researchers also shared that they invited others outside their culture to participate and learn more about their own cultures through language, food, and celebrations. This was a strategy used to make sure cultural exchanges were mutual and provided further opportunities to bond and create community. For example, NP shared how they taught colleagues slang from their home country which provided opportunities to bond and facilitated communication.

Sometimes I also get carried away when I'm speaking with friends, and I use like local Nigerian slangs, and they're like, "What do you mean?" I'm like, "Oh, I really need to teach you guys what I mean." And I teach all of my friends Nigerian slangs. -NP

### ***Learning and Adapting to Sustain Community***

Co-researchers acknowledged that creating and sustaining community came with its challenges: it required work, intentionality, and risk to create meaningful communities. Learning and adapting to sustain community involved acknowledging the differential value instructors placed on topics selected for academic study in classrooms, the different understandings of time, and navigating what co-researchers termed “Canadian culture of exaggerated kindness.”

Co-researchers described instances where they felt excluded from their scientific and academic communities due to lack of knowledge of existing histories and experiences. For example, co-researchers spoke about how the topics studied in their courses were often more relevant to a Canadian context that excluded African issues, perspectives, or topics.

This meant that topics chosen for study structured who could contribute to class discussions and draw upon personal experiences, and affected how issues could motivate engagement. Co-researcher SP speaks to this experience of being excluded from academic conversations that exclude other values and experiences:

Some concepts ... you just won't understand those concepts because they never existed in your own country. So, while some people can easily grasp some concepts and run with it, you tend to lag behind, and [ask] 'what are they even talking about?' because these things don't feature in the part of the world where you grew up. -SP

Being part of communities in Canada also required co-researchers to respect, value, and work with time differently. From an African perspective, the culture of time is experienced and valued differently than it is in Canada. Comparing the construct of time in both contexts, SP stated: "You need to be very time conscious, and you must respect time. Coming from an African country, in my part of the world, time is really not a thing that people consider a lot in their lives." Co-researchers sought to form a different relationship with time. They needed to consciously build a practice of adhering to time that included planning and scheduling their activities, as everything was strictly organized by time. Co-researcher NP noted, "here everything happens on the clock, you have to plan, you have to schedule". This was something co-researchers felt they needed to learn.

Co-researchers also spoke about the struggle of engaging with community when the expectation was exaggerated kindness and political correctness when interacting with others, especially because factors such as race and ethnicity sometimes influenced how others interacted with them. It was noted that being polite and perhaps overly or 'superficially kind' was a big part of Canadian culture. Co-researchers drew similarities between this kindness and recognition of the other with the African culture and perspectives of Utu/Ubuntu that emphasizes "I am, because you are." Yet, participating in community with projected niceness was a challenge for some who expected others to speak directly about what they thought or how they felt without the cloaking of pleasantries that co-researchers felt hindered true communication and masked intentions. Co-researchers discussed how their practices of being blunt and to the point could be interpreted as being rude in the Canadian context, therefore requiring them to negotiate bluntness with recognized politeness. This was particularly challenging in contexts or conversations that included race.

It's like, people are trying to be safe because they see you, you are black. So, someone doesn't want to say something that will sound racist. They don't want to make you feel like they're criticizing you. ... So, they are being very careful and then it comes off superficial because you're like, 'That's fake.' But then I think people are just trying to be safe. So, I don't pick offense to that. I just understand that the person is trying to play safe, and I just avoid it. I feel like it's something that people are trying to build over time but it's not a good practice too. -KP

## DISCUSSION

Our study provides unique insights of the transition experiences of African international tertiary students, and how they integrate into a new environment. The accounts highlighted here have implications for future African international students, as well as mentors and faculty in North American institutions. These results provide insights on how African international students negotiate transitions of home and community.

### Home

Findings from this study indicate that African international students seek connections to home by making their new unfamiliar environments familiar. Previous studies conducted in the USA, Norway, UK, and Atlantic Canada have shown that students feel isolated, lonely and suffer from homesickness in their new environments as they are unable to relate to their new context (Akoth & Enoksen, 2022; Ambrósio et al., 2019; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Noregia & Justin, 2020; Okusolubo, 2018). Co-researchers in our study, also reported feeling lonely and homesick, and sought for and implemented coping strategies to overcome this feeling. Some of the coping strategies highlighted in those studies which were also practiced by co-researchers included connecting with other Africans and other international students, and engaging in recreational, academic, religious activities, and events of interest (Akoth & Enoksen, 2022; Ambrósio et al. 2019; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Noregia & Justin, 2020; Okusolubo, 2018). However, new insights gained which had not been previously identified were how co-researchers noted they created time to virtually connect with family, as well as using items (photos, jewelry, clothes, food) to engage the senses and stimulate a sense of belonging. Several scholars have emphasized how artifacts can help people feel nostalgic and recreate a feeling of identity and home in the context of migration (Baldassar, 2001; Fortier, 2000; Tolia-Kelly, 2004).

Baffoe (2010) notes that African immigrants recreate their homes in their minds by associating familiar objects in their new environment with their native continent and deliberately make efforts to imitate aspects of their native nation in the new setting, such as cooking traditional cuisine that is comparable to what can be found back home. Co-researchers agreed that artifacts and common threads (such as food, cultural symbols, objects, clothes, etc.) served as a method for them to not only express who they are and feel proud of their identity, but also to develop sensory connections, and connect with others of similar culture as they reminisce about home. We recommend that future African international students purposefully bring artifacts when transitioning to a new host country, as these items serve as crucial physical and mental cues, fostering comfort, connections to family and a sense of identity. Higher institutions can play a role by creating African student associations, offering safe spaces, and organizing events that provide opportunities for international students to showcase their culture and exchange knowledge on food, fashion, jewelry, arts, and other items of interest. Such initiatives may create opportunities for cultural, community and social connections, and peer to peer mentorship opportunities, thereby contributing to the development of a sense of home and belonging. In our study, co-researchers got a sense of home and belonging when they identified cultural and social activities, events, communities, and places that resonated with their home countries. Thus,

it could be beneficial if higher education institutions provide information about resources in the host country even before students arrive. Providing information on social and cultural resources well before arrival may ease the transition experience and reduce feelings of loneliness and homesickness, as students have enough time to identify, plan and make connections before arrival.

### **Community**

Another significant finding of our study is how co-researchers navigated community creation. They began with understanding what it meant to have a community (conceptualizing), choosing who or what encompassed their community (creating), and finding touch points and sources of energy and motivation to nurture and grow in that community (sustaining). As similarly reported in other studies in Norway, UK and Atlantic Canada, community levels, such as international student associations, other students, friends, African families, and church groups, play crucial roles in overcoming challenges and fostering a sense of belonging (Akoth & Enoksen, 2022; Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014; Noregia & Justin 2020). These structures of support provide much-needed emotional, social, and practical assistance, representing integral aspects of the transitional and coping phases, as international students adapt to their new environments (Akoth & Enoksen, 2022; Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014; Noregia & Justin 2020).

While forming and belonging to communities is crucial for integration into the new environment, our study further adds to the literature by revealing and analyzing the complexities involved in the process. At one level, forming community involves understanding the new context, interests, and activities, and being committed to put in the work to (re)build from start what others in this community may have taken years to grow into. On another level, it is negotiating the cultural dynamics and how much African identity, and culture can be maintained while participating within another culture. The difficult thing with being in a new community is that it comes with adjusting and making changes. Co-researchers noted they had to come out of their comfort zone by becoming more versatile to become part of other communities. Hence, building communities involved co-researchers sustaining a space within the new community and recognizing the impact one makes within it, as well as the impact the community makes on the individual.

Despite belonging to several communities, an underlying factor was that co-researchers sought membership in meaningful communities that could serve as a support system, provide new experiences and connections, and be places in which they could contribute. Our findings therefore emphasize the need for humanizing community. From Afrocentric perspectives this means acknowledging cultural divides and varying cultural settings toward the need for building relationships across cultural differences (Gaspar & Ballantyne, 2021). Given that relationships are built on trust and solidarity over time, this emphasizes why co-researchers differentiated their “village” back home from their communities formed in Canada, or why it seems to be taking extra time and effort to discern the intent behind “superficial kindness.” Co-researchers were constantly unearthing and discussing these questions: “What extent of yourself do you have to bring as a Black-African? Can you bring

your full self to these new communities? How much of my Black-African identity, however uncensored, is accepted in this new context? And how much do those in this new community hold back in trying to play it safe around you?" While there were no clear and all-encompassing answers, our study offers experiences of African international students grappling through conversations, activities and engagement with identity, home, and community, and provides points of reflection that faculty, mentors and counsellors could consider while trying to build relationships and engage with African international students. In examining how African international students negotiate their racial and cultural identity in a new setting, particularly in contexts where they may be a minority, both institutional and informal support systems (e.g., communities that are sensitive to the cultural differences and identity negotiations) are needed to ensure overall wellbeing as Bofo-Arthur (2014) highlights.

### **Intercultural learning and identities**

Aspects of intercultural learning elaborated in this paper reminds us that intercultural learning is a non-linear journey, as there were hurdles and challenges that co-researchers needed to overcome (Arthur, 2017; Arthur, 2018; Gu et al., 2010). As highlighted in this study, although there are challenges in making the transition to unfamiliar contexts, navigating through a new cultural context provides opportunities for intercultural learning, and increased intercultural competence. This includes appreciating home, learning more about self, learning more about others and about new places, elevated cultural awareness, increased cross-cultural communication skills and a strengthened appreciation for diversity, which further shapes skills, behaviours, decision-making, and values based on the new perspectives gained. This builds upon Ovie & Barrantes (2021) ideas about intercultural learning as multi-dimensional, interactive, dynamic, embodied and reciprocal. Participating in new communities, while requiring tact and effort, presented opportunities for new intercultural learning about a new cultural context. As reported in another study in the UK, co-researchers noted that they were conscious of their identity and cultural beliefs and made sure not to lose them while needing to learn and adapt to the host country's culture (Hyams-Ssekas et al., 2014). Some co-researchers found joy in discussing their culture and teaching their friends and colleagues about it. Thus, to enhance the reciprocal nature of intercultural learning, the host country needs to be receptive, and direct interactions are required which include conversations about their home country and references that acknowledge and appreciate their home cultures in both academic and social interactions. However, there are currently few opportunities for mutual cultural exchange, as also evidenced in previous studies in the USA, UK, and Norway, where students sometimes experience negative stereotypes about their African culture and traditions and find it difficult to socialize with people from the host country (Akoth & Enoksen, 2022; Gu et al, 2010; Hyams-Ssekas et al., 2014; Okusolubo, 2018). Thus, as higher education institutions seek to recruit a diverse population of students, we recommend that institutions provide training and resources for faculty to incorporate diverse and global perspectives into their teaching, develop cross-cultural courses and inclusive curriculums, as well as offer cultural competency training for faculty, staff, and students to enhance understanding and cultural sensitivity.

For co-researchers in our study, intercultural learning also occurred by learning more about local Indigenous cultures in Canada and the similar experiences of colonization experienced in home African countries. This is akin to what Cooperrider (2017) terms “the gift of new eyes” (p. 137). In summary, co-researchers’ intercultural learning indicates that they draw upon their connections to home through strengths in navigating the demands of thriving in a new cultural context (e.g., living time differently) while at the same time noticing similarities (e.g., experiences of colonization). This leads to intercultural learning of new knowledge and forms of social interaction through creating and sustaining new communities.

### **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

One strength of this study is that it is in contrast to other studies that follow the premise of “research on participants” with little to no engagement of research participants in research design, methodology, or interpretation. Our collaborative study emphasizes team participation in research design. It offers a holistic perspective on the experiences of African-international students, aligning with an Afrocentric perspective, as it ensures that the story of Africans is told, synthesized, and interpreted by Africans. By involving participants as co-researchers, we were able to tease out nuances and incorporate important elements of African culture, beliefs, and values. This inclusive approach also created a safe space where participants (as co-researchers) could bring their true, authentic selves to meetings, and together, we learned, shared stories, and critically examined experiences to deepen personal and collective understanding. This ultimately enhances the utility of the research findings. Furthermore, our study also provides practical insights on how students build connections to home, and why and how higher education institutions can begin to offer support in various ways to promote a sense of belonging and to foster community connections.

Finally, we recognize the need for resources and strategies to support African international students during this transition, thus drawing from the experiences and narratives shared by co-researchers, the broader Identities in Transition Team, developed a mentoring and transition toolkit which includes a website, with a photo-book, podcasts, and case stories for reflections (Identities in Transition Team, 2023). These resources are designed for use by current and prospective African international students, faculty and staff, counsellors, and mentors. They aim to facilitate a smoother integration not only into the academic ecosystem of the host country but also into its social, economic, and cultural context.

We contend that these strengths provide evidence of the value of the process, the findings, and our actions. Similar to Reason and Bradbury (2006) we were less concerned with validity as an objective concern toward getting it right or searching for truth. Instead, we were more interested in a criteria for validity as “being useful or helpful” to others (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 343). In particular, the comments and quotes of co-researchers indicate the significance of this research and how the research is validated by offering new ways of seeing and becoming in transition.



With regards to the limitations, the findings presented in this study are based on the experiences of six students and one research staff from four African countries. Africa is made up of 54 countries and as such these findings should not be considered as representative of all African international students. We recommend that future research studies should involve a larger and more diverse number of African international students as these could reveal other unique experiences that may not have been captured in this study. Also given that co-researchers received fully funded scholarships for their graduate studies in Canada, there may be other socio-economic factors affecting students' integration into a new environment which are not reflected in this study.

## CONCLUSION

Co-researchers creatively found ways to represent home in a foreign land by building sensory connections in their new environment and building and sustaining relationships. They demonstrated resilience as they maintained and formed relationships, even with the COVID-19 pandemic when physical relationships were almost non-existent. A big part of identifying with a new community is being able to refer to it physically and mentally as home. "Home" has a way of bringing joy, peace, and comfort. As part of their academic and social journeys, co-researchers demonstrated skill in exploring and participating in new activities and identified with their new community, as they strived to find solace in their new environment. This reflects the process of adapting mentioned earlier in our literature review (Gu, et al., 2010)

Intercultural learnings of co-researchers were captured in the stories, experiences, and photos they shared. From this we know that intercultural learning is key to the transition of African international students, as it increases the strengths, imaginations, creative strategies, and creates more room for innovative access to resources to thrive in new environments (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Girmay, 2017; Maundeni et al., 2010; Montgomery, 2010; Pruitt, 1978). Ultimately, institutions, policy makers, and faculty in North America can build on these shared experiences to offer tailored support for African international students to better support African students making the transition from home to studying abroad. This will include offering holistic learning opportunities for cultural integration such as recognizing the need to provide context and resources in course materials that require historical knowledge and context of the host country, providing a safe space where African international students can share experiences and engage in respectful interactions and discussions in the classroom, being intentional about adding global and diverse perspectives to topics where applicable, and also being sensitive to cultural differences, barriers and challenges that African international students face when settling in a new host country. Institutions should also provide access to valuable mentorship and networking opportunities to help navigate the rather daunting and complex journey of finding oneself in a new country. We recommend African-international students view the transition journey as a means of strengthening their intercultural learning and competence and should make conscious efforts to identify resources in their new environments, be open-minded, explore, and be part of communities of interest. ■

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