

IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION AMONG YOUNG ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANTS IN METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON*

ELIZABETH CHACKO

ABSTRACT. Ethiopians are a recent immigrant group in the United States, having entered the country in significant numbers during the 1980s and 1990s. This preliminary study examines the ethnic and racial identities of children of first-generation Ethiopian immigrants living in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The results of twenty in-depth interviews demonstrate that race is a much more fluid and contested form of identification than is ethnicity to the young immigrants, who equate the latter unilaterally with their Ethiopian heritage. Immigrants also adopt different subject identities in various locales, favoring those that are most in accordance with their needs and sense of self. *Keywords:* assimilation, Ethiopian, identity, immigrant, Washington, D.C.

The issue of assimilation of second-generation, non-White immigrants has received the attention of scholars from diverse fields since the early 1990s (Hall 1990; Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993; M. C. Waters 1996; Rumbaut 1997; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Identity is central to the notions of assimilation and Americanization, and its formation and transformation are integral to the immigrant experience. Race, ethnicity, nativity, class, and gender play critical roles in identity formation, retention, and change in a multicultural society. Sociocultural mores and sanctions, as well as structural realities, also fashion the contours of identity for immigrants. In the United States, in an increasingly pluralistic post-1960s society, the relationships between immigrant and host society and their theorization have metamorphosed in both subtle and obvious ways.

This study explores the concepts of immigrant and identity by examining the creation and reconstitution of racial and ethnic identities of 1.5- and second-generation immigrants of Ethiopian heritage in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Second-generation immigrants are defined here as those who were born in the United States and have at least one parent who relocated to the United States. The 1.5 generation is identified as comprising persons who immigrated with their parents to the United States when they were less than twelve years of age (Rumbaut and Ima 1988).

Ethiopians formed the largest group among African immigrants to the Washington metropolitan area during the 1990s, accounting for nearly 25 percent of this population (Singer and others 2001). The dominance of the Ethiopian community among African-born persons in the region is also supported by the 2000 U.S. census. The Washington Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area, with 15,049 Ethiopians,

* I would like to thank the immigrants I interviewed for sharing their experiences and thoughts with me. Thanks also to my colleague Tom Foggin and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

✉ DR. CHACKO is an associate professor of geography at George Washington University, Washington, D.C. 20052.