

Afro-Swedes

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Demographics

According to Statistics Sweden, Sweden had 9,482,855 inhabitants by the end of 2011. 15.1% of the population were born abroad. If one adds to that inhabitants who were born in Sweden, but with at least one foreign born parent—so-called "second generation immigrants"—then over 25% of the population were either first or second generation immigrants. Although, about half of them have a background in another European country.

Giving an exact number of inhabitants in Sweden who may broadly be characterized as "black"—more about this below—is difficult since there are no population statistics in Sweden based on race. Instead one has to try to make a rough estimate based on countries of origin. This means calculating how many of Sweden's inhabitants were born in countries and how many have parents who were born in countries that one can assume are—according to the prevailing racial taxonomy of majority Sweden—predominantly black (or ideally have official racial population statistics or at least statistics from which race can be gleaned). A relatively simple way of doing this based on data from Statistics Sweden is to include mainland African countries (excluding North African countries), the Caribbean island nations, and 12.9% of migrants from the USA (i.e. the percentage of the U.S. population that are African Americans). Of course, this will exclude countries with significant populations of African descendants throughout the Americas. It will also exclude black Africans/African descendants from other European countries such as France, England or Holland—perhaps most significantly, those who never had or whose parents never had post-colonial, independent citizenships—not to mention North African countries like Egypt or Morocco and Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean African Diasporas like Mauritians and Papua New Guineans.

According to such a rough and conservative estimate of first and second generation immigrants

from Africa and its' diaspora (i.e., in this case, the Caribbean and the USA) we get a population of 170,595 "Afro-Swedes" or 1.8% of the national population. It is safe to say that of the Nordic countries Sweden has the highest percentage of black inhabitants and that it has among the highest percentage of black inhabitants in Europe.

About 80% of Afro-Swedes are first or second generation Africans (including "second generation immigrants" with one African and one non-African parent). Of these the overwhelming majority are or have parents who are from the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia or Sudan). First and second generation immigrants from the Horn of Africa amount to 104,888 persons or 1.1% of the national population.

Black in Sweden

If we are to properly understand what it means to be "Afro-Swedish"—by which I mean a black inhabitant of Sweden—we need to move beyond standard understandings of African diasporas. First, we need to move beyond the so-called "Black Atlantic" as a framework (Gilroy, 1993; Wekker, 2009). Most Afro-Swedes have not been immediately shaped by the New World experience of being descendants of transatlantic African slaves. For instance, the Horn of Africa was never extensively involved in the transatlantic slave trade. About 80% of Afro-Swedes—who are first or second generation African immigrants—are more likely shaped by the so-called New African Diaspora experience of being post-colonial African immigrants (Okpewho and Nzegwu, 2009). To this group the pronounced racialization of Africans and African descendants in the West, at the expense of other identities, is often a novel experience. However, to young first generation and second generation African immigrants being black is likely to play a greater role in shaping their self-identity than to first generation African immigrants who came to Sweden as adults.

Second, contrary to being, say, Black British or Black American, there is no such thing—at least not yet—as a collective Afro-Swedish identity. Amongst Afro-Swedes in general black identity is not something that is culturally inherited from a pre-existing black diasporic community, but

something which ranges from being of marginal importance to self-identity to being central but largely improvised. Afro-Swedes are a diverse group that do not share any common history of, say, slavery or being subjected to Swedish rule. Being black in Sweden is therefore more open-ended, indeterminate and various than in many other locales of African diasporas.

However, it is still meaningful to speak of Afro-Swedes as a group. This allows us to articulate how certain people in Swedish society are racialized, challenge popular conceptions of Swedish nationality and the conditions that shape their racial identities (or lack thereof). To this end, it is also meaningful to refer to mixed-race persons in Sweden with one black parent as Afro-Swedish since they are unlikely to be perceived as white and will tend to be associated (if not always identified) with being black (cf. Gordon, 1997).

Afro-Swedish Intellectual History: A Preliminary Sketch

There are many ways in which one could write a history of Afro-Swedes. Here I am going to focus on black inhabitants who have contributed to public discourse about black people in Sweden.

Following the same reasoning as above I will include Afro-Swedes who themselves are, or have one or two black parents who are, from Africa or any of its diasporas.

Perhaps the obvious person to begin such a history with is Adolf Ludvig Gustav Fredrik Albert Badin or Albert Badin for short. Badin was according to his own estimate born in 1750—probably as a slave on the Danish island of St Croix in the Caribbean. From there he was shipped to Sweden and given as a gift to the Queen of Sweden, Louisa Ulrika of Prussia, who wanted to test the burgeoning racial theories of the Enlightenment and find out if a "child of nature" could be civilized. Badin became an educated man who, according to Madubuko Diakité's history of African diasporans in Sweden,

was proof to the Court and social engineers at the time that even the most noble savage could be educated. His ability to learn became a cornerstone in arguments for proving that

an education could also be achieved by the common man, an argument that led to the education for all, not just nobility and Royals (Diakit , 2005)

Despite becoming an esteemed member of the royal court of Sweden and married twice to women of the Swedish aristocracy, Badin had to withstand racial insult and strife until the end of his life in 1822—which he wrote about and reflected on in notebooks and letters (Pred, 2004).

During the 1950s and 60s some prominent African American jazz musicians such as Quincy Jones, George Russell, Albert Ayler and Don Cherry (father of the Afro-Swedish musicians Neneh Cherry and Eagle-Eye Cherry) made a home for themselves in Sweden for periods of time. Also the Afro-Cuban jazz legend Bebo Vald s (father of another Afro-Cuban jazz great, Chico Vald s) settled down in Stockholm in 1961 where he lived an anonymous life as a bar pianist until his career took off again in the 1990s when he rose to international acclaim. The African American painters Harvey Cropper, Clifford Jackson and Herbert Gentry settled down in Sweden in the 1960s too as did a friend of Harvey Cropper from his days in New York City, the African American poet Allen Polite (father of Afro-Swedish journalist Oivvio Polite). Although Polite never published a book during his lifetime (1932-1993), he was, before he moved to Stockholm, still an important figure in the black bohemian New York City artist milieu that preceded the Black Arts Movement and influenced the artistic development of his friend Amiri Baraka.

In 1969, Black Panther Party Solidarity Committees, consisting mostly of African American deserters and draft dodgers, were formed in Stockholm and Malm  (as well as in Copenhagen and Oslo) to counter misinformation in Europe about the Black Panthers and their struggles in the U.S. The Solidarity Committee in Stockholm included Clifford Jackson and Allen Polite. Between 1969-1972 and under the leadership of its' chairman, Herbert Washington, the Solidarity Committee in Malm  published a bi-weekly newspaper in English, *The Lumpen Proletarian*. It spread information about the Black Panthers, African American resistance to the war in Vietnam, experiences of discrimination in Sweden and was sold in both Sweden and to G.I.'s in Germany.

Herbert Washington and the Solidarity Committee in Malmö also invited the co-founder of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, to do a speaking tour in Sweden, but due to illness he only gave one talk at the Academic Association at Lund University (AF) on February 2, 1972.

During the 1960s until his death in 1985 the African American journalist and activist, Sherman Adams, wrote articles for such publications as the largest eveningpaper in Sweden, *Aftonbladet*, and the Danish morningpaper, *Politiken*. Adams made headlines in 1970 when he, as part of a demonstration protesting the war in Vietnam, greeted the arrival at Arlanda airport of the new US ambassador to Sweden, Jerome Holland, with the placard, "White house nigger: go home!" Adams wrote about his views on the politics of the US in his book, *Mitt Amerika: en svart avhoppares memoarer* [My America: The Memoirs of a Black Deserter] (Prisma, 1980).

Born in Harlem and having spent his teenage years in Nigeria, Madubuko A. Diakité earned an LL.B. at Lasalle Extension University in Chicago (1967), then a Diploma in Documentary Filmmaking at the prestigious New York Institute of Photography (1969). In 1970 Diakité came to Sweden and earned an M.A. at the Department of Film and Theater, Stockholm University (1973). He later went on to earn an LL.M. (1992) and a J.L. (2007) in human rights law at Lund University. In 1973 one of his independantly produced films about the impact of Malcolm X on a youth in Harlem, *For Personal Reasons*, was aired on Swedish television. The film was widely shown at film festivals in the US, Canada, Europe and Africa and was awarded Special Mention at the Grenoble Festival of Short Films in France. That same year his documentary about the discrimination of people of color in the university town of Lund, *Det osynliga folket* [The Invisible People] was aired on Swedish Television. An early champion for the civil and human rights of non-ethnic Swedes, Diakité helped found several anti-discrimination organizations in Sweden such as Lund University Foreign Students Organization (LUFSSO), English International Association (which has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations), Antidiskrimineringsbyrå i Lund [The Anti-discrimination Bureau of Lund] and Centrum mot rasism (CMR) [Centre Against Racism]. He's also the editor-in-chief of the periodical *The Lundian*

(which often highlights issues of discrimination and human rights) and the author of numerous articles on subjects of racial and ethnic discrimination in Sweden and elsewhere.

In 1990 an association was formed in Stockholm by Congolose born (DRC) Mkyabela Sabuni to represent Afro-Swedes, Afrosvenskarnas Riksförbund (ASR) [The National Association of Afro-Swedes]. Since then it has become a nation-wide association with regional offices in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, Jönköping and Umeå. Its' spokesperson is Kitimbwa Sabuni (nephew of Mkyabela Sabuni and brother of the current Swedish Minister of Gender Equality, Nyamko Sabuni). Kitimbwa Sabuni has become a household name in Sweden as a frequent commentator on issues of anti-black racism and Islamophobia.

During the 1990s and 00s the Afro-Swedish journalist Oivvio Polite wrote several articles in newspapers and periodicals pertaining to race and racism. Some of the articles were collected in Polite's book, *"White Like Me": utvalda texter om rasism 1992-2007* ["White Like Me": Selected Texts About Racism 1992-2007] (Danger Bay Press, 2007).

One of the early scholars of African descent to write about issues pertaining to black people is the Ethiopian born associate professor in human geography, Mekonnen Tesfahuney. Since the early 1990s he has published widely on topics of racism, multiculturalism and migration. His doctoral dissertation from 1998, *Imag(in)ing The Others: Migration, Racism and the Discursive Construction of Migrants*, was frequently cited in Allan Pred's book, *Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination* (University of California Press, 2000).

During the latter half of the 1990s and early 00s, Louis Faye (a son of Senegal), played an important role in establishing postcolonial studies in Sweden. His cultural association Diggante ("in-between space" in Wolof) organized many public symposias and lectures in Stockholm on African diasporic themes with both national and international speakers. International speakers included Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Gayatri Spivak, Valentin Y. Mudimbe, Manthia Diawara, Robert Young, Julian Isaac, Homi K. Bhabha and Paul Gilroy. He was also the co-editor (together with Michael McEachrane) of the first book to apply postcolonial theory on Swedish matters, *Sverige*

och de Andra: postkoloniala perspektiv [Sweden and the Others: Postcolonial Perspectives] (Natur & Kultur, 2001). About half of the contributions were on black issues.

Since her doctoral dissertation from the University of Michigan in 2000, *Black and Swedish: Racialization and the Cultural Politics of Belonging in Stockholm*, Lena Sawyer has published numerous academic articles and book chapters on Afro-Swedish diasporic identity and also co-edited the governmental report, *Utbildningens dilemma: Demokratiska ideal och Andrafierande praxis* [The Dilemma of Education: Democratic Ideals and Othering Praxis] (Fritzes, 2006).

A frequent commentator in the Swedish public arena on black related matters is the Afro-Swedish film studies scholar Ylva Habel. Among her publications is the book chapter, "Whiteness Swedish Style" from the anthology, *Afrikansksvenska röster* [African Swedish Voices] (Notisförlag, 2009).

The Ugandan born, Victoria Kawesa—among other things, PhD student in Gender Studies and researcher on civic rights in Sweden for the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union—has written numerous reports on racism and discrimination in Sweden for the EU, European Network Against Racism, Centre Against Racism in Sweden and the Swedish government. Among her publications are the first governmental report on anti-black racism in Sweden, *Att Färgas av Sverige* [To Be Colored by Sweden] (DO, 2007) and experiences of discrimination amongst Somali immigrants in Sweden, *Vart tog rättigheterna vägen?* [Where Did the Rights Go?] (CMR, 2011). She has also pioneered the use of the term "Afrophobia" to describe anti-black discrimination in Sweden and elsewhere in the EU. The term is now frequently used by several of the country's governmental agencies such as The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå).

In 2009 two anthologies were published with contributions by and about Afro-Swedes, *Afrikansksvenska röster* [African Swedish Voices] (Notisförlag, 2009) edited by Kolade Stephens and, *Afrosvensk i det nya Sverige* [Afro-Swedish in the New Sweden] (Notisförlag, 2009) edited by Cecilia Gärding. *Afrosvensk i det nya Sverige* consists of personal narratives of what it's like to be an adolescent of African descent in Sweden. The book was turned into Sweden's first hip hop

opera, “Folkoperan: Remixed” [The Folk Opera: Remixed], and is now being tuned into a feature film.

One of the most lauded wordsmiths of the younger generation in Sweden in recent years is the Afro-Swedish poet, novelist, playwright and essayist, Johannes Anyuru. Some of his work include the play, *Förvaret* [The Repository] (Glänta, 2009), a critical look at Swedish asylum politics, and his most recent, *En storm kom från paradiset* [A Storm Came from Paradise] (Nordstedts, 2012), a biographical novel about his Ugandan father who studied to become a fighter pilot when Idi Amin took over and which, after a sejour in Zambia, wound him up in Sweden as an asylum seeker.

Several prominent Afro-Swedish rappers have released tracks that give voice to the discrimination against people of color in Sweden. Among them are Blues' ”Andra sidan (Bortom Dimhöljet)” [The Other Side (Beyond the Fog)] (1999), about pushing forward in the face of strife as a person of color; Feven's ”Bränn BH:n” [Burn the Bra] (2000), a feminist protest song against sexism and racism; Timbuktu's ”Pendelparanoia” [Commuterparanoia] (2001), a stream of consciousness rap from the perspectives of a racist person and a person subjected to racism; and Adam Tensta's “They Wanna Know” (2007) about prejudices faced by youngsters like himself from the immigrant dense and underprivileged public housing projects.

The Ghanian born Swedish politician, Joe Frans, sat in the Swedish parliament 2002-2006, for the Social Democrats, and was before that one of the front persons of the organization Ungdom Mot Rasism [Youth Against Racism]. In 2004 he founded the Swedish Martin Luther King Prize, which is an annual prize for persons doing work in Sweden in the spirit of Dr King. The Egyptian Eritrean Social Democratic politician, Mariam Osman Sherifay, was a member of the Swedish parliament 2002-2006 and is now the chair of the Centre Against Racism in Sweden. Nyamko Sabuni, a politician for the Liberal Party, became the first black person in a Swedish cabinet with her appointment in 2006 as the Swedish Minister of Integration and Gender Equality.

On April 15, 2012, an event took place at the Modern Museum of Art in Stockholm where the Swedish Minister of Culture, Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth, laughingly, and in front of a laughing and

applauding white audience, cut a piece of the nether parts of a cake depicting a racist caricature of an African woman and fed it to her. The cake installation was created by the Afro-Swedish artist Makode Linde who also lent his black painted face to the head of the woman. The day after the National Association of Afro-Swedes asked the minister to resign. Several Afro-Swedes participated in the ensuing debate such as the artist Makode Linde, Kitimbwa Sabuni (the spokesperson for the National Association of Afro-Swedes) and Victoria Kawesa. Gambian born Afro-Swede, Momodou Jallow—board member of the European Network Against Racism, the Centre Against Racism in Sweden and head of the Malmö-branch of the National Association of Afro-Swedes—wrote an article about the event and the silence surrounding anti-black racism in Sweden for *The Guardian* in the U.K. and was interviewed on the same subject by the television channel, Al Jazeera English. A discussion about the matter, with several of the Afro-Swedes who were involved in the debate, will be published in the forthcoming anthology, *Afro-Nordic Landscapes: Equality and Race in Northern Europe* (Routledge, 2012).

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