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“It is not about us; it is never about us”: An Analysis of the Alliance of Jamaican Alumni Associations (AJAA) in Canada, 1980s–2000s

Abstract

Using the Alliance of Jamaica Alumni Associations (AJAA) as a case study, this paper demonstrates that the Jamaican diasporic community in Toronto created organizations as vehicles of cultural retention, community responses to anti-immigrant and anti-Black racism, and community development—both in the host and home countries.

Introduction

Jamaican organizations emerged alongside the increase in the Jamaican diasporic population in Canada, including activist groups, cultural groups, and alumni associations. In the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), newly founded Caribbean and Black organizations were led predominantly by Jamaicans, including the Black Business and Professional Association, the Markham African Caribbean Canadian Association, and the Tropicana Community Services.

This paper examines the emergence and development of the Jamaican community in Toronto—which has a substantial Jamaican population—through the lens of diasporic organizations, focusing on the Alliance of Jamaica Alumni Associations (AJAA). By 2007, Toronto had over 82 Jamaican organizations, 58 percent of which were alumni associations of Jamaican primary and secondary schools, and 21 percent for “[s]ocial, cultural, and broadly defined organizations” (Jones 2007, 107). Using the AJAA as a case study, this paper will argue that the Jamaican diasporic community in Toronto created organizations as vehicles of cultural retention, community responses to anti-immigrant and anti-Black racism, and community development—both in the host and home countries.

Although “diaspora” is a widely disputed term, for the purposes of this paper, I use the definition put forth by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. For Zeleza (2008), diaspora “implies a form of group consciousness constituted historically through expressive culture, politics, thought and tradition, in which experiential and representational resources are mobilized, in varied measures, from the imaginaries of both the old and the new worlds” (7). It is the shared group identity formed through similar experiences in the “homeland” (Jamaica) and the “host country” (Canada) presently and across history (7). These similar experiences connected members of alumni associations through a shared group identity, which manifested in the AJAA.

Background on the AJAA

Individual alumni organizations emerged with the increase in Jamaican immigration in the mid-twentieth century. Each alumni association is linked to and comprises members from secondary (and some primary) schools in Jamaica. Interviewee Paul Barnett, for example, came to Canada in 1967 after graduating from Ardenne High School and founded the Ardenne Alumni Association in Toronto in 1981 (Barnett 2021, author interview). Through funding and projects, each alumni association in Canada donated/donates money and resources to its high school counterpart in Jamaica. Dave Reece states that his association was a vehicle through which he and fellow St. Jago alumni gave back to the school that educated them (Reece 2021, author interview). Tka Pinnock comments that, through fundraisers, her association, Wolmer's Alumni Association, Toronto, sought to build outstanding libraries, functioning computer labs, and new bathrooms in Wolmer's Girls' and Boys' high schools as well as support current students from low-income families (Pinnock 2021, author interview).

In 1988, 13 individual Jamaican alumni associations merged to form the AJAA (Barnett). As Paul Barnett recounted in our 2021 interview:

One evening, a group of us, about six of us or seven of us, got together down at King Street to have a nice evening and a nice drink. So, we were there discussing about forming some sort of alliance because the alumni associations that were presently there, were raising funds both for projects here in Canada and back in their schools in Jamaica. But there are only so many weekends that are real good weekends for fundraising. [...] There were not enough weekends for each association to have their functions. So, we decided to come together and look at how we work as a body to spread out those functions to make it beneficial to everybody. Then it was said, "Can we get together and do an alliance?" (Barnett 2021, author interview)

After establishing a single unified association made up of individual alumni associations, the number of alumni associations "grew to 25, to 30, 40, then we were up at 52 at one time" (Barnett 2021, author interview).

Today, the AJAA is described as "a charitable umbrella organization comprised of 40 Toronto-based alumni associations affiliated with education institutions in Jamaica" (Williams 2014, 35). As the umbrella organization, the AJAA provides benefits to its individual alumni association members, including charitable tax receipts for donations made to the alumni association and liability insurance for alumni events.

In addition to fundraising for their high schools in Jamaica, the alumni associations connect with the Jamaican diasporic community in Toronto through programs for new immigrants and scholarships for Jamaican and Jamaican-descended youth. In Pinnock's interview, she discussed her role as the chair of the scholarship committee for Wolmer's Toronto, which gave scholarships to Jamaican students pursuing post-secondary studies in Canada and Jamaica (Pinnock 2013, author interview). She also described the AJAA's youth leadership program "which brings current students from the high schools [in Jamaica] for leadership training in Canada.

They are able to meet Canadian students, and engage with a postsecondary institution” (Pinnock 2013, author interview). Paul Barnett and Andrea Chambers both recounted their experiences with international students in Canada, who they would invite to their houses for “special holidays” such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter (Barnett 2021; Chambers 2021, author interviews). These alumni organizations also created spaces for incoming Jamaican immigrants to meet other Jamaicans and learn “collective survival strategies in the new society” (Henry 1994, 247). The AJAA’s commitment to “collective survival” in the Jamaican diaspora is evident in its services, resources, and spaces for Jamaican immigrants. As scholar Frances Henry (1994) comments, “voluntary associations within immigrant communities generally play a mediating or brokerage role between the ethnic group and the mainstream society” to help newcomers adapt to the new environment (235).

Brubaker’s concept of “intragroup identity” aptly describes the AJAA. Brubaker argues that we need to shift our “attention from groups to “groupness” and treating this groupness as variable and contingent rather than fixed and given” (Brubaker 2002, 168). The Jamaican diaspora is not a monolithic “group,” but rather, each actor has a different understanding of their own “groupness” or “Jamaicanness,” which emerges in their involvement in diasporic organizations in Toronto (Brubaker 2002, 168). For example, the AJAA focuses on providing opportunities for Jamaican students and improving educational facilities in Jamaica, while the Jamaican Canadian Association (JCA) seeks to “advocate to improve the well-being and equity of Jamaican, Caribbean & African-Canadian communities within the Greater Toronto Area” (Jamaican Canadian Association 2021). The idea of “intragroup identity” highlights the differences within the Jamaican diaspora in Toronto and challenges common essentializing misconceptions of “Jamaican immigrants” as monolithic, criminal, uneducated, or other negative stereotypes.

Community Development in Canada

“Social capital,” or the benefits of belonging to larger social networks, is essential to living in the diaspora and being involved in the diasporic community in the “host country.” Such benefits include access to employment and housing information via larger organizations (Jones 2007). Terry-Ann Jones argues that Jamaican diasporic organizations serve as vehicles of social capital, noting that “[s]ocial capital among Jamaican immigrants in South Florida and Toronto is dependent on the establishment of social networks and economic niches that are created based on shared experiences and common culture” (31). The AJAA also promotes community development through philanthropy for the Jamaican diasporic community in Toronto.

Both Paul Barnett and Tka Pinnock recounted their experiences on scholarship committees in their respective alumni associations. Paul Barnett described the Graduates Program in which the AJAA gives back to our community that is in Canada here. [There are] students who are finishing high school but [are] having a hard time trying to get into university or college. So as a combined group we came together and sat issuing scholarships. First of all, we just came together to celebrate their success of finishing high school. Then a few years later we gave scholarships and bursaries to those who were going to universities and colleges, to assist them. And that continues up to today. (Barnett 2001, author interview).



The Care and Share program and the Graduates Program illustrate the AJAA's local projects and objectives within Toronto: to care for, support, and improve the experiences of all individuals living in the Jamaican diaspora in Toronto. The AJAA's network is a prime example of the potential of social capital for diasporic communities.

Vehicle of Cultural Retention

The concept of “homelands” is crucial to diasporic studies. One of Brubaker's key elements of diaspora studies is the “Homeland Orientation,” understood as an “orientation to a real or imagined ‘homeland’ as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty” (Brubaker 2005, 5). William Safran's definition of diaspora also includes a connection to “a specific original ‘centre’” and a need to continue to relate to this centre while living in the diaspora (Safran 1991, 83–84). The AJAA's connection to its “homeland,” Jamaica, manifests in the AJAA's events and philanthropy for that country. For example, the AJAA has run SoccerFest every summer since 1985 modeled on the national high school soccer competitions in Jamaica—Manning Cup and DaCosta Cup. Paul Barnett describes the event as follows:

There are two high schools in Jamaica, Kingston College and St George's College, that had a soccer tournament every year. It was the battle of supremacy for Knox Street.¹ They were both on the same street in Jamaica, and there's always a rivalry between the two of them. And so, they brought it to Canada. But then the other schools, they wanted to be part of this whole excitement of the day. So, it was brought over to the Alliance and it grew from the two schools to one time we had 12 schools, 14, schools, 16 schools. (Barnett 2021, author interview)

The brochure from Rhona Dunwell describes SoccerFest as a place for the AJAA members to “[r]elive the memories of Jamaican football competition during this fun filled day” (Dunwell 2021, personal correspondence). The popularity and success of the AJAA in SoccerFest highlights the significance of cultural retention and memory through the conduit of soccer. The expansion of this event in Jamaica into the AJAA's SoccerFest in Toronto indicates the Jamaican diasporic community's connection to events in the “homeland” and desire to reproduce those events and memories within their new “home” country.

Although the main goal of the AJAA's philanthropy for Jamaica was/is to improve schools in Jamaica, philanthropic events and projects offer spaces for cultural retention and connections to the homeland. Frances Henry (1994) argues that events in Jamaican diasporic organizations in Toronto give “people an opportunity to re-establish their ethnic origins and enjoy aspects of their culture [...] [while] also keep[ing] migrants in touch with events in their countries of origin” (235).

Paul Barnett recalls the AJAA's Ten-Year Project in the 1990s, the first long-term project after the incorporation of the alumni associations into one large organization. The project had different foci every two years, such as education, technology, or science, and the organization would spend one year in Canada raising funds and then one year in Jamaica implementing the project. For example, the two-year sub-project, “Technology 2000,” occurred in the mid-1990s and donated computers to various high schools in Jamaica (Barnett 2021, author interview). The next two years focused on “Science 2000,” where the AJAA “went to one of the pharmaceutical places to ask for lab equipment, Bunsen burners and things like that [...] to help replace some of the old equipment” in Jamaican schools (Barnett 2021, author interview).

¹ Kingston College and St. George's College are located on North Street. Knox Street is incorrect.

This ten-year project both empowered students in Jamaica with proper resources and encouraged members to return to Jamaica to assist the students with the new resources, resulting in cultural retention.

Additionally, the AJAA offered/offers spaces to maintain Jamaican identity, of particular importance to new Jamaican immigrants. Tka Pinnock recounts the nostalgia she feels for Jamaica when attending AJAA events and meets other alumni members. Her alumni association is “a very specific community [in which] we are connected to each other through memories,” including six or seven decades of people who attended the same school (Pinnock 2021, author interview). She also states that each of the alumni association spaces provides “a different form of community” and a sense of familiarity, especially for recent newcomers.

However, also crucial to this discussion is the physical and temporal distance from the homeland, which reconfigures the diasporic experience and organizations. As James and Davis (2012a) argue, the longer a diaspora exists, the greater “the physical and cultural distance from the imagined ‘homeland’” becomes (19). Pinnock also commented on this increasing distance in our interview: “while Canadian-born children and grandchildren may go to alumni events, they have no connection to the schools” (Pinnock 2021, author interview). As Jamaican descendants become further distanced from the high schools represented by alumni associations, the less interested they are in their maintenance. Therefore, to continue cultural retention, the AJAA relied and relies heavily on the continued immigration from the homeland (Pinnock 2021, author interview).

This is not to suggest, however, that young Jamaican-Canadians—i.e., second-generation or later—do not engage in diaspora philanthropy. In her study on young Jamaicans and diaspora philanthropy, Tka Pinnock (2013) found “evidence of a strong obligation among [Jamaican descendants] to help their fellow Jamaicans and Jamaican-Canadians through the giving of time, goods, talents, skills, and money.” Youth leaders in the Jamaican diaspora expressed a desire to “give back” and a need to (re)connect with “the homeland” as primary motivations for leading and participating in diasporic initiatives (Pinnock 2013). As such, while they may not participate in their parents’ and grandparents’ alumni associations, they have founded alternate ways of maintaining their Jamaicanness (Pinnock 2013).

Conclusion

Although the AJAA has received little scholarly attention, its actions from its inception in the 1980s until the present day demonstrate its role in the Jamaican diasporic community as a vehicle of community development, cultural retention, and community response to anti-immigrant and anti-Black racism. Today, due to a lack of interest from younger Jamaican descendants, a major concern of the members of the AJAA is sustainability. With its Graduates Program, the AJAA seems to have expanded its focus to include the educational attainment of youth in the diaspora. As Dr. Michele Johnson shared in our correspondence on her involvement in the Knox Past Students’ Association: People there [in Jamaica] still believe that education is the key to an improved life. And most families will do everything they can—sometimes with enormous sacrifice—to try to support children’s education. I think that might be one reason why the alumni associations continue to work at it—to give (often poor) children an opportunity. (Dr. Michele Johnson 2021, personal correspondence)

This quotation speaks to Jamaican youth's experiences in both Jamaica and Canada and the AJAA's extensive involvement in the improvement of schools and opportunities in both countries. Through community development in the "homeland" and the "host country," the AJAA was and continues to be a vehicle of collaboration and cultural retention for Jamaicans in Jamaica and the growing Jamaican diaspora in Toronto. During the Knox College Virtual Fundraising Gala on April 17, 2021, I felt the strength of the Jamaican diasporic community in Toronto. That I as a non-Jamaican felt this empowered by an event held by the Knox Past Students' Association speaks to the possibilities of alumni associations as spaces of cultural retention and community engagement, not only for the Jamaican diasporic community in Toronto and youth in Jamaica but also for the larger Black community in Toronto.

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