

Unraveling the Controversies and Misconceptions on Black Diaspora and Migrant Settlements in Historical Scholarship

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Abstract

This paper examines some conceptual ambiguities arising from the used of related but differing meaning of the two words in diaspora studies. Beginning from 1940s, African diaspora studies and black studies in general began to gain momentum and renewed vigour. Probably, may be due to Africans who fought in the frontlines with the Europeans during the World War 1, and perceived to be no tactically inferior or the Atlantic Charter that has promised fake hope for the black people may be all encompassing. The aim and objectives are in three folds; first, to conceptualise the related, but differing meanings of the both words 'diaspora and migrant' with lucid and clear-cut dichotomy. Secondly, to draw a comparative analysis between the Jewish and African diasporic experiences. Thirdly, to interrogate the extent to which diaspora and migrant communities have contributed, to the overall political and socio-economic advancement of Africa, in terms of wealth repatriation and industrialization, physical resettlement back home. It adopts descriptive historical method of contents analysis, utilizes secondary sources of data for thematic critique and review of literatures. Finally, paper finds out that African diasporic experience was an outcome of expanding European imperial and capitalists' exploitations.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Migrant, Controversies, Dispersal and Exploitation*

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Background to the Study

The study of black diaspora emerged from a neglected, but lackluster themes, arising from the black experienced in the United States of America and New World. After several centuries of over dependence on white filtered approach or Eurocentric perspectives, as (Uya, 2010, p. 3), observes. As from the 1940s and the 1960s upwards, diaspora studies became very important and significant component in looking at cultural convergences and networking that exist among the various racial groupings of humankind, (Imbue, 2012, p. 18), offers. It spanned over thousands and hundreds of years, and how such global races have been able to explore, exploit and harness their global resources to achieve transformation and greatness on the world across the entire human globe, notes Uji, 2022, p.8.

In all respect, documentation of reconstructed black experiences gained momentum from the earlier writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, up to John Hope Franklin, whose scholarly works confronted the white filtered approaches that dominated race relations with a seemingly biased, Eurocentric lens and imaginations. As aptly puts down by Du Bois, “the problem of the twentieth century was the “Race Question,” notes, Uya, p.3. It is true that there is no subject in African history that reverberates and attracts so much debates and controversies like the Atlantic slave trade, observed Imbue, p. 24. Probably due to the dastard and brazen rape of the continent, or mass emigration of human capital, nor the political and economic quack mire of the African people. However, there had been pre-Atlantic diaspora with little emphasis to the number of emigrants, pull and push effects and the colossal implication as compared to the former.

African Diaspora reflects a mass and forceful uproot of Africans and their descendants away from their ancestral homeland to places like Europe, Americas and the Asia for economic and social exploitations (Cudjeo, 2008, p.53). It is imperative to stress that; African Diaspora occurred during the Trans-Saharan and Trans-Atlantic Slave trades. The trans-Saharan or the Arabic slave trade began around 9th century AD through the Sahara Desert, enabled by desert crossing animals like horses, camels, donkeys etc., while the trans-Atlantic slave which began by the Portuguese in the middle of 15th century was conducted mainly through maritime advancement of ships technology. Cujeo, p. 54. The scenario here is that, the population mostly affected by the Arab expedition was people and communities of East African coast who had early contacts with the Arab of Oman who began plantation agriculture at the island of the Indian Ocean. In same vein, Europeans of Central European states, spearheaded by Portuguese also proceeded with first black slaves to Lisbon, through Gomez company. Shortly afterwards, Britain, Spain, France and others made a field day of the trade exploits.

Historicising Diaspora from Etymological Origin to a Global Concept

The word diaspora emerged from a Greek term *diaspeirein*, meaning scattering or dispersion, which came to shed light as a key analytical concept on different aspects of dispersion; violent/involuntary and migrant/voluntary resettlement of groups, (Baumann, 2000, p. 323-8) offers. Etymologically, it originated from the Hebrew Septuagint. Baumaan contents that diaspora was interpreted “as a preparation, an immediate situation, until the final divine gathering in Jerusalem,” (Baumaan, p. 326). It is important to note that diasporas have

occurred as a result of forced deportation, the threat annihilation and genocide, economic and geographic factors. Imbua (2012, p. 18) asserts that the origin of the word has been traced to the period when Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek. The translators conceived the term to refer to citizens of city-state who immigrated to a conquered territory for purposes of empire expansion, he adds (Imbua, p. 18).

Historically speaking, the roots origin of the word '*diaspora*,' coming from Greek is not surprising at all, giving her histories of spread and scattered across ancient world as a result of involuntary forces of push and pull factors. Imbua observed that the Jews became victims of anti-Semitism in all areas of dispersion through forced captivity and exile. (2012, 19). The depiction of human zero associated diaspora has continued to maligned and conjured debased dignity of human persons. Personally, I owed the belief that the humongous genocidal atrocities, such as murder, rape, brutality in the very brazen horrific manner at which there were committed, often leaves the supposedly claimed superior group with no option, rather than to be manipulative and circumspective of their victims to avoid seeking social retributive justice. Hence, continued ramming conditions of subjection and unfair practices against them, like racial segregation, inequality, injustice and claiming human superior (superior race). Consequently, the theory of *Shalilat ha-galut* (denial of the exile), espoused by many Jewish scholars, posits that Jewish life and culture are doomed in the diaspora because of assimilation and acculturation, and that only Jews who physically returned to Israel have renewed their existence as Jews. (Uya 2010, p.54). It is difficult to wipe away fore-bearing and cultural existence of the diaspora communities, irrespective of long the absorption may have been, the relics and (DNA) remains. Though, some may fade away over time. In another development, the former Senegalese Atiop Diop succinctly submits thus: (Harris, 1993, p. 705).

In the twentieth century and especially after World War I, it was the American Negro who spoke forcefully for African Negro rights during the making of the Treaty of Versailles and the formation of the League of Nations at a time when we were not in a position to speak for ourselves.

And;

Trailing the same track, on the contributions of Africans in diaspora, Kwameh Nkrumah of Ghana has this to say concerning the contributions of diaspora communities on the political and economic realization and self-reliant the African peoples: (Hariss, 1993, p. 705).

These sons and daughters of Africa were taken away from our shores, and . . . they have not forgotten their ancestral links . . . Long before many of us were even conscious of our own degradation, these men fought for African national and racial equality . . . Now that we in Africa are marching towards the complete emancipation of this continent, our independent status will help in no small measure their efforts to attain full human rights and dignity as citizens of their country.

These statements reflect the ever-connecting umbilical attachment of the Africans in the diaspora and their relationship with the continental ones.

Conceptual Reflections and theoretical Approaches

Migration

Migration and diaspora are closely related, because both has to do with dispersal and movement away from ancestral homeland to other places. The striking differences between the two involves voluntary and involuntary movements. The former has to do willingness due to the pursue for greener pasture, environmental aesthetic, and adventuring; whereas, the later implies forceful eviction due to imperial forces for purposes of exploitation, war, famine and influenzas, as the case may be, offers, (Lovejoy, p. 2. 1982). According to R. Udo, migration involves a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence and has been defined as an economic man's reaction to economic differentials, or it involves the movement of population especially people over a vast expanse of space, (Udo, p. 3. 2014). As Akogwu Christiana observes, the movement of people from one location to another is therefore not peculiar to any group of people, since all human groups have migrated at one time or the other in history, (Akogwu, p. 1. 2025).

J. Connell, B. Dasgupta and M. Lipton contents that access to land are largely the causes of rural poverty and by implications, the resultant precursors of rural-urban migrations as aptly captures bellow:

Migration didn't just start today as it has been in practice for long. For migration to take place, there are usually 'push' and 'pull' factors at work. Push factors are the reasons that make someone decide to move. Often push factors are negative things such as unemployment, poverty, crop failure, droughts, flooding, war, poor education opportunities or poor services and amenities. Pull factors, on the other hand, are the expectations which attract people to the new place. They are usually positive things such as job opportunities, a better standard of living, better education or better healthcare which entices people to migrate. 2011, 103.

Diaspora

Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade which started in the 15th Century by the Portuguese remained one of the subject matters to birth African diaspora. However, there had been earlier forms of African diaspora through the trans-Saharan trade, but does not attract much attention and debate like that of the Atlantic, maybe due to the horrendous brutality and mortality rate arising from it (Uya, 2010, p. 59).

As from the 1950s up to 1990s, different perspectives have emerged on black diasporic African studies. Probably, due to the Civil rights Movements in the United States or attainment of independence by several African states; nor the exploits of the Jewish state of Israel in the Arab-Israeli war whose experiences were similar to the black story. In effect, all these interplays could have forged a new outlook for diaspora development. Brubaker reflects on the overused of the word “diaspora” and stresses that it “losses its discriminating power- its ability to pick out phenomena, make distinction (Brubaker, 2005. P. 1-2). Black artists, scholars and intellectuals have made concerted effort throughout history to explore the similarities and

differences between Black and Jewish diasporic experiences, and thus, focused on wide range of themes to draw the connect or disconnect. These include; scattering of black communities in relations to trans-Atlantic trade or the role of the continent itself. Others looked at the decolonization process in Africa and the role of Civil Right Movement in the United States of America. From thence came various lenses of reconstructing the black experience.

The term diaspora according to Imbua, (2012, p. 18) is derived from a Greek word, *diaspeirein* meaning scattering, dispersion. It is used historically to refer to “the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from their ancestral homeland, or “people dispersed by whatever cause to more or more than one location” or people settled far from their ancestral homeland. In the words of Cohen (1971, p. 14), describes diaspora as a nation of socially independent but spatially dispersed communities.” William Safran article, (1991, p. 83-99), “Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myth of homeland and Return” identifies six distinctive features between diaspora and migrant communities: in his words,

- i). **Dispersal from an original centre**-The group (or its ancestor has been scattered to two or more foreign peripheral regions;
- ii). **Collective memory of myth of the homeland**-There is shared remembrance and cultural narrative centered on the ancestral homeland;
- iii). **Feeling of Alienation**-Members often believe there are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted in the host society where they live
- iv). **Homeland Idealization and return**-The ancestral homeland is seen as the true, ideal home and an eventual return is expected or desired when condition permit
- v). **Commitment to the homeland**-diasporic communities show sustained concern for the welfare, restoration, or maintenance of the homeland
- vi). **Extended identity through homeland ties**-The identity and solidarity are deeply shaped by ongoing relationship with the homeland in social, cultural and political terms.

Put differently, the historian Tina M. Campt notes, in Campt (2004, p. 79), giving its popularity, diaspora is often seen as “the requisite approach” or theoretical model through which one should (or perhaps must) understand all formations of black communities, regardless of historical, geographical or cultural context.” Similarly, Khachig Toloyan lend his voice of profound years of experience in the field. He observes that over the years, the century old concept of diaspora has a reminiscent associated with grief, misery, hopelessness and displacement. (Kachiq, 2007, p. 648). Neglecting the historical connections and routes remains the single largest misrepresentation and misinformation in terms of theoretical and contents analysis of issues arising from forceful eviction or deportation.

The concept of diaspora is a flawed one, considering its employment on all-embracing ahistorical manner of roots from slavery and neo-slavery composition. Each time the word is mentioned, it resonates emotional and psychological moments of sub-human species, tied to the World's capitalist empire of pains, agony and despair, or worst still, a world of oppression, injustice and brutality. Otherwise, the capitalist west would have sorted a way for negotiating out reparations and indemnity for the barefaced rape of Africa. Gilroy concept of 'diaspora'

refers to identities were the territorial rootedness that is often the primary marker of communities, is no longer present for a population that still share communal ties (Gilroy 2000; Waldron, 1992). Although the term Black Atlantic stem from rigorous scholarly exercise of historian Robert F. Thompson. (McNeil, 2003, p. 75). Gilroy was the pioneer in conceptualizing the 'Black Atlantic' as a diaspora, expanding the concept by drifting away from a generalized perception of a unified community toward an appreciation of its heterogeneity, Chivallon, 2002. Gilroy concept has been undergone criticism of being too Anglocentric, failing to recognize the diversity of Black diaspora, (Zaleza, 2005, p. 35-68; Maddox, 2021, p. 43).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Theoretical framework of analysis helps to give an explanation into the epistemological issues of the phenomenon under investigation. Two theoretical approaches have been advanced; the Giroy's "*Black Atlantic*" Theory and *Pan-Africanism*. The "Black Atlantic" was espoused by John Gilroy to examine the cultural and political history of Africans in the diaspora emphasizing specifically on the 'route' of migration and the roots of African culture in context to the hybridity of black culture. Gilroy views race as the historical product of multiple and complex cultural and political encounters between the Europeans and Africans across Atlantic and resettlement era. He emphasized transnational and intercultural perspectives that call attention to syncretic or 'creole' cultures of the diaspora. Gilroy, 1991, p.121. Gilroy's reconstruction stem from a variety of artistic construction of great black figures, beginning from Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Toni Morrison and Richard Wright. (Saeten, 2024, p. 7), he considers artistic expression, music and performance. (Gilroy, 1993, 2018), 38-39). Gilroy advances this to buttress his point:

These imaginative attempts to revisit slave experience and sift it for resources with which to bolster contemporary political aspirations do not point towards disassociation (Afrocentric or otherwise) from the West and its distinctive understandings of being, thinking, and thinking about thinking and being. To be sure, the misguided association of slavery with antiquity and precapitalist system of production and domination is broken, but the break indicates opportunity to reconceptualize so that capitalist, racial slavery becomes internal to modernity and intrinsically modern. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 220). And again;

Diaspora allows for a complex conception of sameness and for versions of solidarity that do not need to repress the differences with a dispersed group in order to maximize the difference between one "essential" community and others. [...] Identity conceived diasporically resists reification in petrified forms even if they are indubitably authentic. The tensions around origin and essence that the diaspora bring into view allow us to perceive that identity should not be fossilized in keeping with the holy spirit of ethnic absolutism, identity, too, becomes a noun of process. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 255).

Pan-Africanism as a theory offers a framework for understanding of the multifaceted history of Africans and their descendants through collective consciousness against circumscribed racism and marginalization of the black personality to human zero. Pioneered by great black intellectuals like Henry Sylvester Williams, Markus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois. Pan-

Africanism was indeed an ideological movement strongly emphasized the unity, solidarity of African people based on shared historical experience to foster a collective action.

Diaspora Contribution to the Advancement of Homeland

It could be recalled that Pan-Africanism as a creation of Black diasporic experience was fundamentally responsible to the formation of the African continental body, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) which later became African Union (AU) from 2002 (Ali and Wondji, 1935, p. 542). The early history of Pan-Africanism, defined as “a political and cultural phenomenon, regards Africa as, Africans and African descendants abroad as a unit and aims at the regeneration and unification of Africa and the promotion of a feeling of solidarity among the people of the African world” (S. K. B. Asante and David Chanaiwa, p. 740).

Ante Diop remarkably voiced that during the Versailles treaty the continent of Africa had no say of their affairs. It was our brothers and sisters in diaspora who spoke on our behalves. It would be worthy to note that the contributions of Africans in the diaspora to the development the continent cut across several strata of humanity, which includes; economic, political, cultural, education and technological fields. However, what has made the blind not to see their efforts could be attributed to myriads of factors such as corruption and poor governance, political instability and seat-tight syndrome; lack of investment protection, brain-drain and bureaucratic bottle necks.

Conclusion

Diaspora, in whatever form of its manifestation has to be first and foremost, a product of migration, movement or dispersal. In essence, it has nothing to with forceful or voluntary eviction, but the important characteristics has been that, movement, transfer to a new geographical region has taken place, in real time, and physically. Attempt to draw a scholarly parallel between diaspora and migration has been due to unresolved ambiguity arising from the controversial framing of the two concepts. However, from the analyses giving above, it is clear that the two words are related but etymologically and conceptually variant. One is movement *ab initio* and the other, is sedentary, after movement had taken place, with some measure of adjustment and adaptation to the new environment.

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