

Defining and Utilizing Diaspora: A Path to African Post-Development

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Abstract

This article explores a definition and use of diaspora in a way that may engage African post-development aspirations. Firstly, the piece presents a clarification and further development of the early conceptualizations of diaspora engaging African and African descended scholars. Then, the article elaborates on not only what the African diaspora is but what it does. Finally, the paper presents a utilization of the African diaspora to assist in mobilizing trans-continental linkages with members in the Global North and increasingly with the Global South in support of their post-development agendas. It provides an understanding of the role of African descendants in an increasingly globalizing world and the arguments of the re-structuring of global geo-political order in the wake of narratives of the rise of Africa and the BRICS nations. The paper presents what can be gained and reconfigured in particular articulations of the African diaspora that seeks to engage post-development.

Keywords: African Diaspora, Post-Development, African Union, Pan-Africanism, Critical Practice

Résumé

Cet article explore une définition et une utilisation du terme diaspora d'une manière qui pourrait répondre aux aspirations post-développement de l'Afrique. Tout d'abord, l'article présente une clarification et un approfondissement des premières conceptualisations de la diaspora auxquelles se sont intéressés les chercheurs africains et d'origine africaine. Ensuite, l'article explique non seulement ce qu'est la diaspora africaine, mais aussi ce qu'elle fait. Enfin, l'article présente une utilisation de la diaspora africaine pour aider à mobiliser les liens transcontinentaux avec les membres du Nord et, de plus en plus, avec le Sud, afin de soutenir leurs programmes de post-développement. Il permet de comprendre le rôle des descendants africains dans un monde de plus en plus globalisé et les arguments de la restructuration de l'ordre géopolitique mondial dans le sillage des récits de l'émergence de l'Afrique et des nations BRICS. L'article présente ce qui peut être gagné et reconfiguré dans des articulations particulières de la diaspora africaine qui cherche à s'engager dans le post-développement.

Mots-clés: Diaspora africaine, post-développement, Union africaine, panafricanisme, pratique critique

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Introduction

Africans engage diaspora in a myriad of ways. At many levels, Africa is mobilizing ideas of origins, central to the articulation of diaspora, to attract international resources from peoples of African descent for community, national, and continental development. NGOs, IGOs, and most national governments on the continent have established programs or agencies in order to capitalize on the diaspora's contributions. Despite billions of dollars of transfers from the diaspora flowing to the continent, major indicators suggest that there are no substantial development benefits for the continent from such transfers. This paper explores the possibilities of reformulating understandings of diaspora that will inform institutional apparatuses organized for obtaining transfers and mobilizing social, political and economic resources in support of the seemingly elusive project of development on the continent.

As stated, the aim of this article is to explore a use of diaspora that could be helpful as a means of promoting post-development (as in social, economic and political transformation that transcend the unsustainable developmental agendas of the Western countries). The paper presents a definition of diaspora that may be used to assist in mobilizing diasporic trans-continental linkages with members in the Global North and increasingly with the Global South in support of their development agendas. By engaging with diaspora as a method through which a grouping of people engages with a process of development, I hope to make significant conceptual and theoretical contributions to our understanding of the possibilities for African development. This new conceptualization aims to explore the role of diaspora in an increasingly globalized world in the face of the re-structuring of international geo-political order related to the rise of Africa and the BRICS nations. This study not only deals with what diaspora is, but also how it operates and why it is utilized. Overall, a clear understanding of diaspora could inform the discourse of various organizations and institutions, such as IGOs, NGOs, and national governments, particularly on post-development.

Defining diaspora

It is important to precisely define diaspora before exploring its use. The concept of diaspora has progressively and increasingly been utilized with greater sophistication and wider application. It has also been used by an ever-growing number of peoples, like the Chinese, Indians and Irish, who were previously not included in the conceptualization of diaspora and who utilize the term and idea in exciting new ways to explain the intricacies of the condition and situation of various communities, cultures and populations.

A consequence of its growing popular usage, there has been a fierce debate about how, exactly, to define the concept. There have been significant differences in the conceptualization of diaspora among scholars. In fact, some academics, such as Kim Butler, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Darlene Clark Hine, have this reasonable concern with Khachig Tololyan (1996: 8) holding the view that diaspora may be in danger of becoming promiscuously capacious. As a category, it can include adjacent phenomena such as globality, migrancy, and transnationality.

For this reason, scholars such as Kim Butler (2001: 193) and James Clifford (1994: 310), have argued that there is no clear or concise definition of diaspora. In spite of all these scholarly misgivings and concerns, if it is not possible to clearly define diaspora, it may be at least achievable to specifically define the African diaspora. Arguably, the African diaspora is the condition of peoples that have a shared consciousness comprised of various communities across different geographies with the notion of common origins in Africa confronting many forms of social exclusion. In other words, and more specifically, it is the condition that produces the collective consciousness of sameness rooted in the idea of common African origins and based on common experience of black abjection. The three major principles embedded in this definition—of collective consciousness of sameness, idea of common origin and a black abjection—are implicitly and explicitly expressed in popular and well-established conceptualizations of the African diaspora.

A diasporic framework was utilized before the specific concept of diaspora gained its present prevalence. Starting in the early nineteenth century, this diasporic framing was evident in the challenges to the discursive exclusion of African peoples from Enlightened humanity. Indeed, it is what historian George Shepperson refers to as a challenge to influential post-Enlightenment figures such as G.W.R. Hegel (as cited in Shepperson, 1982: 47), who said in his famous lectures in history in Berlin that Africa (and basically peoples of African descent) had “no historical part of the World... no movement or development to exhibit” and “was only on the threshold of the World's History.” Ever since then, some prominent educators and intellectuals of global Africa (as in the worldwide population of Africans and their descendants), such as Olaudah Equiano, Edward Wilmot Blyden, W.E.B. Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Amy Jacques Garvey, have utilized diasporic framework to express ideas to bring greater awareness of, and to oppose African subjugation. A diasporic framing, prior to specific use of the word diaspora, has been deployed in a way to stress the humanity of African peoples who have been shut out from the world by a vast “veil” (Du Bois and Edwards, 2007: 2).

Beginning in the 1950s the term African diaspora has been systematically applied to the historical experience of peoples of African descent. Since then, there have been increasing attempts at conceptual clarity. Notions of a common experience of oppression, of common origins, and of shared consciousness have all been included in such efforts. A number of scholars have articulated this idea. Indeed, many, if not all, who have tried to specifically define the African diaspora have presented similar fundamental defining elements.

Historians Joseph Harris and George Shepperson, two of the earliest theorists of African diaspora scholarship, have had, perhaps, the most significant impact on the development of the field of diaspora studies and its theorization. Joseph Harris (2003: 158), conceivably the most influential of the two, sees diaspora as having what he considers to be the following characteristics: “[1] Collective memories and myths about Africa as the homeland or place of origin; [2] a tradition of a physical and psychological return; [3] a common socioeconomic condition; [4] a transnational network; [5] and a sustained resistance to Africans’ presence abroad and an affirmation of their human rights.” These elements can be considered common conditions that connect a diverse set of peoples based on the idea of common origins, collective consciousness of sameness and shared experience of abjection (causing the conditions that lead to the drive for the “affirmation of human rights”).

Colin Palmer, who wrote “Defining the Modern African Diaspora,” follows in the tradition of Joseph Harris and specifically defines the characteristics of diaspora. He views diasporas as imaginary and symbolic communities and political constructs. In specifying five characteristics, Palmer (2000: 29) argues:

[1] Regardless of their location, members of a diaspora share an emotional attachment to their ancestral land, [2] are cognizant of their dispersal and, [3] if conditions warrant, of their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside. [4] Members of diasporic communities also tend to possess a sense of “racial,” ethnic, or religious identity that transcends geographic boundaries, to share broad cultural similarities, and [5] sometimes to articulate a desire to return to their original homeland.

In other words, it is an expression of the common experience of oppression and alienation, it is rooted in a sense of collective solidarity, and it is oriented toward a notion of common origins.

Additionally, Emmanuel Akyeampong (2000: 185), in “Africans in the Diaspora: The Diaspora and Africa,” building on earlier definitions of diaspora, states:

Africans were certainly dispersed from the African continent to two or more foreign regions; they retained a collective memory, vision or myth of the homeland. Racism makes people of African descent feel alienated in the Americas; some regard Africa as their true home and the place of the eventual return—witness Marcus Garvey’s ‘back to Africa movement’; and African-Americans are committed to restoring Africa as a place of safety and prosperity, especially through Pan-Africanism.

Akyeampong also highlights the significance of common origins in Africa, alienation, and collective struggle.

Moreover, Paul Zeleza (2008: 7), who wrote “The Challenges of Studying the African Diasporas,” states that diaspora can be seen simultaneously as “a process, a condition and a discourse.” In his conceptualization, he highlights the significance of group consciousness, marginalization, self-affirmation, navigation of multiple belongings and real and imagined genealogies and geographies based in origins in Africa (s). These elements can be considered common conditions that connect a diverse set of peoples based on the idea of common origins, collective consciousness of sameness and shared experience of exclusion.

The centuries of global Africans’ diasporic framing and later clearer conceptualization of diaspora ought to be included in continental African definition of the notion in organizations such as the African Union (AU). In so being, the African Union (AU) definition of the African diaspora as “peoples of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union” is a good start but it needs to be slightly modified to fully embrace the significance of earlier and well-established conceptualizations (African Union, 2019). Rightly, the idea of the peoples of African origin is fundamental to the definition of the African diaspora. It is apt to include the members of the diaspora irrespective of citizenship and nationalities. Although the “contribution to development of the continent and the building of the African Union” is important, it is not essential in defining the African diaspora. The issues of collective consciousness or solidarity needs to be expressed for and among the peoples of African origins in defining the concept. The issue of black abjection or exclusion was not engaged though it is a core feature of the African diaspora as argued by major scholars in the field. The significance of collective consciousness and black exclusion (that goes along with African origins) to any definition of the African diaspora will be clarified later in the article.

Drawing from the works of eminent scholars, it is important to add some nuance to the definition of the African diaspora so its conceptual significance is recognized and actualized. As such, in defining the African diaspora, it emphasizes peoples outside their ancestral or original homeland anywhere on the African continent who are deemed to be of African origins. Thus, this comprises all peoples who are regarded as African descendants including those who are held to be black (but it keeps in mind what is it to be black is not static and changes over time and place).

In fact, this engagement is a strategic essentialist approach to blackness and not an acceptance of European racial constructs. Moreover, the definitions accept or ought to accept Earl Lewis’s (1995: 767) idea of overlapping diasporas.

In terms of time period, the definitions focus on the modern era (post 15th century to present and spanning the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial eras) of voluntary and involuntary migration of African descendants but

also engages the pre-modern era including the pre-trans-Atlantic, trans-Saharan, trans-Indian Ocean, Trans-Red Sea slave trades and other movements.

Utilizing diaspora

In its application, it is important to see in all of these attempts at defining the African diaspora an effort to understand not only what the African diaspora is but also what it does—not in a literal sense but as a critical practice. Significantly, this issue has been explored by a number of scholars, including Stuart Hall, Brent Hayes Edwards and Paul Gilroy. The term diaspora, as Stuart Hall (1995: 206) suggests, can be used in a literal or “closed” way, to describe peoples who have been dispersed from their “countries of origin,” but who attempt to maintain links with the past through endeavors to preserve their traditions and “seeking eventually to return to the homeland—the true ‘home’ of their culture—from which they have been separated.” However, Hall (1995: 206) proposes what could be called a more “open” or critical sense in which diaspora could be seen that is much more complex and offers greater possibilities (which is worth quoting here):

Diaspora also refers to the scattering and dispersal of peoples who will never literally be able to return to the places from which they came; who have to make some kind of difficult “settlement” with the new often oppressive, cultures with which they were forced into contact; and who have succeeded in remaking themselves and fashioning new kinds of cultural identity by, consciously or unconsciously, drawing on more than one cultural repertoire. These are people who, as Salman Rushdie wrote in his essay in *Imaginary Homelands*, ‘having been borne across the world are translated men (and women)’ (Rushdie, 1991, p. 17). They speak from the “in-between” of difference cultures, always unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of another, and thus finding ways of being both the same as and at the same time different from the others among whom they live (Bhabha 1994).

This critical, instead of literal, usage of diaspora opens up many possibilities. Though, in this sense, diaspora engages cultures and identity but not in agreement that diaspora is culture or identity. Nevertheless, diaspora in its critical sense complicates the literal interpretation or its initial usage of the concept. As an alternative to a literary interpretation, Percy Hintzen and Jean Muteba Rahier (2010: 2) argue that diaspora, when “transferred as a signification of the black social reality, served as a powerful metaphor to publicize the even more devastating, brutal, and pervasive violence that constituted the common history of colonialism and slavery.” The point is that when diaspora is shorn of its literal definition, the way becomes open for consideration of the African diaspora as engaging not only a single people but by a variety of different identities, cultures, and communities (Hall, 1990: 235). In other words, it is an expression of the common experience of oppression and alienation, is rooted in a sense of shared consciousness, and is oriented toward a notion of common origins.

The African diaspora could be understood by the three central principles in its definition. These principles contribute to the understanding of diaspora as a critical practice. I conceive critical practice here as forms of expression out of which diaspora may be articulated or made discernible. These three principles (that could be seen as critical practice), all conditions of diaspora, are the common experience of abjection, organized around notions of common African origins, and constituted by forms of universal African consciousness.

The critical practice of diaspora is acts or utterance that critique popular misunderstanding of African peoples. The critical practice of diaspora is manifest in expressive forms. Indeed, critical practice is the modus of expression out of which diaspora is articulated (enunciated and productive of linkages based on sameness across difference). In particular, what are expressed are abjection, common origins and collective consciousness.

Abjection is clearly implicated in the condition that produces the African diaspora. Abjection is the condition of being banished or projected into a form of the monstrously alien (Kristeva, 2003: 389). Specifically, black abjection results from the European’s attempt to dehumanize and expel African peoples out of the domain of humanity. It has resulted in the dehumanization of peoples of African descent and their discursive location outside of the realm of humanity. In turn, the idea of uncivilized, illiterate, underdeveloped is not only linked to what the African is perceived to be but to the very definition of what it is to be African in direct relation to what it is to be European.

Thus, black abjection refers to diverse states of apparent and actual disempowerment of African peoples in the modern global order (Scott, 2010: 15). In this sense, all denials of Africans full humanity, directly or indirect, is black abjection.

The second core principle of the concept of African diaspora is the notion of common African origins. This idea of common origins in Africa must be understood as a strategic reaction of peoples who are racialized as “black.” The association between blackness and Africa is a problematic product of European racial thinking. I view race here to be a social construct that has no biological basis and, following Omi and Winant (1994: 55), is “at best imprecise and at worst completely arbitrary. It is important to understand that, in its articulations, diaspora is not a subscription to an essentialist racial agenda but it strategically engages it because of its concrete and destructive ramifications. It incorporates significant differences across diverse African and African descendant realities.

The third core principle of diaspora is the idea of a collective consciousness of sameness. Collective consciousness is produced out of a mutual awareness of shared circumstances and experiences. It is mutual recognition of sameness across difference. It is a collective consciousness of a connection that is produced out of recognition of the common experience of alienation, racial discrimination and social exclusion (Hintzen, 2004: 107). In fact, as Jacqueline Nassy Brown (2009: 202) suggests, diasporic people “recognize themselves as being of like kind—as sharing some basis of identity—even if they express distinct, sometimes, contrary, histories, and experiences in relation to it.” As a result, the African diaspora is constituted of different identities, cultures and social formations throughout the globe.

A crucial aspect of comprehending diaspora as a critical practice is having an understanding of how it is articulated. Once again, these matters have been examined by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Brent Hayes Edwards. Articulation, as a critical practice of diaspora, is a process of not only creating but also re-creating enunciations and linkages among diverse African peoples in Africa and worldwide (Jennifer Daryl Slack, 1996: 114). Stuart Hall, when interviewed by Grossberg (1996: 141–142), stated the following:

In England, the term has a nice double meaning because ‘articulate’ means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an ‘articulated’ lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called ‘unity’ of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’. The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects.

Articulation is a way of understanding dynamic, complex and fluid relations. It avoids homogenizing and conflating the history of the peoples of variegated societies and engage the differences resulting from particular circumstances, political arrangements, demography, class positions (Palmer, 2000: 29–32). It is the bringing into meaningful coherence of relations of these various peoples. As John Fiske (1996: 213) affirms, Hall’s “double use of the concept of articulation (both speaking [sense 1] and [flexible] linking [sense 2]) is central in his theorizing.”

This theory of articulation refuses to allow meaning any fixity, but “is insistent that meanings are made, are held in place and are used in particular if temporary conditions” (Fiske, 1996: 214). Articulation can be understood as a way of characterizing a social relation without becoming reductionist and essentialist (Slack, 1996: 112). Articulation gives one a way to understand the object of one’s analysis. As Jennifer Slack (1996: 112) asserts, articulation works epistemologically as a means of thinking through “the structures of what we know as a play of correspondences, non-correspondences and contradictions, as fragments in the constitution of what we take to be unities.”

Articulation creates the space for understanding the connections of different African communities with one another. As Brent Hayes Edwards (2001: 60) asserts, “articulation offers the means to account for the diversity of black ‘takes’ on the very concept of diaspora.” Hence, articulation becomes a critical practice of thinking about unity in difference. Articulation recognizes that African peoples have been and continue to be a set of multiple and constantly shifting cultures and identities that are not easily categorized but can still be uttered and linked. Articulation becomes central in the idea of African “sameness” across difference.

I have argued that the African diaspora is constituted out of three factors, embedded in its various definitions: the common experience of black abjection, the notion of common African origins, and a collective consciousness of sameness. As critical practice and articulation, diaspora is engaged with each of these.

It is this engagement that produces the “politics of diaspora” or the political expressions of a universal African subjecthood that challenge the Western and other narratives of blackness (and African underdevelopment as well as other forms of marginalization). Hence, all members of the African diaspora are directly or indirectly involved in politics of diaspora. Diaspora politics is engaged in a quest for dignity, equality, justice, and rights. The politics of diaspora is a struggle for recognition of the humanity of the African subject. The politics is a product of the recognition of sameness. Politics of diaspora allows for the production of new possibilities and new forms of consciousness about the African self. It has the potential to reveal African humanity. These possibilities and potentials may be the basis for African liberation and the liberation from the discourses of African inhumanity and underdevelopment.

Africa, diaspora and post-development

Continental Africans engaging the workings of the African diaspora have an effective means of uniting with African descendants in the promotion of (global) African transformation. For Africa to achieve transformation, it needs to transcend the prevailing Western model of development which is not only unattainable but unsustainable. Hence, it is in the interest of global Africa (as well as the rest of humanity) to abandon such models and seek to go further than platitudes of development for post-development. In such pursuit, there is the need for the implementation of a clear and progressive vision through various policies, programs and agendas for social, economic and political transformation of Africa.

As a case in point of post-developmental ambitions, one of Africa's most comprehensive agendas for social, economic and political transformation is the AU Agenda 2063. The Agenda was created through an extensive consultative process of various local, national, and regional African stakeholders in the interrogation of African transformation. In many ways, this document has identified the top post-developmental priorities of the continent on a whole as stated below:

We are confident that Africa has the capability to realise her full potential in development, culture and peace and to establish flourishing, inclusive and prosperous societies. We thus, commit to act together towards achieving the following aspirations:

Our aspirations for the Africa we want

1. A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development
2. An integrated continent, politically united and based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance
3. An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law
4. A peaceful and secure Africa
5. An Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics
6. An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children
7. Africa as a strong, united and influential global player and partner (African Union, 2015: 1).

Importantly, for Africa, the AU Agenda 2063 has potential to be a viable means of social, economic and political transformation with support from the African diaspora. In this pursuit, there must be clarification with regards to who are Africans and African descendants decoupled from those who are deemed to be of other origins or only those that support the development of the continent and AU (though, global Africa should embrace allies that supports post-development even if they are not African themselves). In one way or another all seven of the aspirations can be generally applied to the workings of the African diaspora but also particularly the three core ideas embedded in its definition and use.

Aspirations 1 and 7 align generally with the utilization of the African diaspora but especially challenging abjection, subjection and exclusion. Africa's marginalization and re-positioning in the modern global order that occurred at the rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism needs to be addressed. Africa has to be transformed from being seen, as it has been falsely propagated, as the site of human underdevelopment with illiterate, uncivilized, and poverty-stricken peoples. For instance, in seeking these two aspirations, the matter of reparative justice should be pursued in the form of not only monetary compensation but restructuring of the global order including fair trade, anti-racism education and campaigns, and land, property, technology, and skill transfer. In this, African descendants may be meaningful in facilitating such tasks in various regions of the world.

Aspiration 2 coincides with diaspora's definition and its utilization, including collective consciousness. Africa and the diaspora are made of up diverse peoples with commonalities and differences as well. There must be further concrete efforts to develop awareness and collective consciousness of all of the members of global Africa. The critical practice and articulation of the various groups will be instrumental in achieving unity based on ideals of Pan-Africanism and Africa's Renaissance.

For instance, the promoting of a collective consciousness could be facilitated through having a continental language in each African state such as Kiswahili so that African and African descendants would be able to communicate with each other directly and effectively (this does not mean doing away with local or other foreign languages).

Aspiration 3, 4, and 6 collectively are the critical practice and politics of diaspora. It is struggle of rights, justice, peace and security. It can be only successfully achieved if it is people-driven and includes youth and women who make up the vast majority of the population of Africa. Education is one of the best means of securing these aspirations.

For aspiration 5, this African objective generally engages the workings of diaspora but it may emphasize common African origins. In this pursuit, with the argument that Africans and African descendants having a common origin in Africa may be the basis for common heritage and building of strong cultural identity and shared value and ethics.

However, it must be clear this is articulation of various peoples with commonalities but differences that should carefully work together.

As a case in point, for African transformation, Africa, with the seven aspirations of AU Agenda 2063, may engage not only the specific elemental components of diaspora but its overall critical practice and politics. This is a means for global Africans to realize what Prof. Horace Campbell refers to as a space of emancipated peoples. Indeed, this call for African transformation demands a means that goes to the root of African underdevelopment. It calls for Africa to include its diaspora, having clearly identified those of African origins, building collective consciousness and engaging black abjection and exclusion.

Conclusion

The African diaspora, from its earliest articulation, has contributed much and absolutely will continue to contribute to an enhanced understanding of African and African descended peoples. In this article, I further developed early conceptualizations of the African diaspora. Moreover, I elaborated and highlighted the significance of the elemental components embedded in the definition of diaspora—a common experience of black abjection, the notion of common African origins, and an idea about a sense of shared consciousness. The paper suggests that viewing diaspora as critical practice and politics can contribute much by revealing insights about the African experience that are often concealed and missing. Overall, the significance of the approach of diaspora studies, linked to its critical practice and politics, is a way of having a fuller comprehension of the effectiveness of Africans' engagement with diaspora on issues of post-development through policies, programs and agendas of IGOs, NGOs, and national agencies.

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