

Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora

by

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The AHA's 1999 annual meeting will have as its theme "Diasporas and Migrations in History."¹ This has been welcomed by those whose scholarly interest and research focus on what has come to be called the African Diaspora. As a field of study, the African Diaspora has gathered momentum in recent times. This is reflected in the proliferating conferences, courses, PhD programs, faculty positions, book prizes, and the number of scholars who define themselves as specialists. But, as far as I know, no one has really attempted a systematic and comprehensive definition of the term "African Diaspora," although the concept has been around since the 19th century and the term has been used since the 1960s, if not earlier. Does it refer simply to Africans abroad, that is to say the peoples of African descent who live outside their ancestral continent? Is Africa a part of the Diaspora? Is the term synonymous with what is now being called the Black Atlantic?

The concept of a Diaspora is not confined to the peoples of African descent. For example, historians are familiar with the migration of Asians that resulted in the peopling of the Americas. Sometime between 10 and 20 thousand years ago, these Asian peoples crossed the Bering Strait and settled in North and South America and the Caribbean islands. The Jewish Diaspora, perhaps the most widely studied, also has very ancient roots, beginning about two thousand years ago. Starting in the eighth century, Muslim peoples brought their religion and culture to various parts of Asia, Europe, and Africa, creating communities in the process. European peoples began their penetration of the African continent in the 15th century; a process that in time resulted in their dispersal in many other parts of the world, including the Americas. Obviously, these Diasporic streams, or movements of specific peoples, were not the same in their timing, impetus, direction, or nature.

The study of the African Diaspora, as mentioned at the outset, represents a growth industry today. But, there is no single Diasporic movement or monolithic Diasporic community to be studied. For the limited purposes of this discussion, I identify five major African Diasporic streams that occurred at different times and for different reasons. The first African Diaspora was a consequence of the great movement within and outside of Africa that began about 100,000 years ago. This early movement, the contours of which are still quite controversial, constitutes a necessary starting point for any study of the dispersal and settlement of African peoples. To study early humankind is, in effect, to study this Diaspora. Some scholars may argue, with considerable merit, that this early African exodus is so different in character from later movements and settlements that it should not be seen as constituting a phase of the Diasporic process. This issue ought to be a subject for a healthy and vigorous debate among our colleagues and students.²

The second major Diasporic stream began about 3000 B.C.E. with the movement of the Bantu-speaking peoples from the region that is now the contemporary nations of Nigeria and Cameroon to other parts of the African continent and to the Indian Ocean. The third major stream, which I characterize loosely as a trading Diaspora, involved the movement of traders, merchants, slaves, soldiers, and others to parts of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia beginning around the fifth century B.C.E. Its pace was markedly uneven, and its texture and energy varied. Thus the brisk slave trade conducted by the Muslims to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries starting after the seventh century was not a new development but its scope and intensity were certainly unprecedented. This prolonged third Diasporic stream resulted in the creation of communities of various sizes composed of peoples of African descent in India, Portugal, Spain, the Italian city-states, and elsewhere in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia long before Christopher Columbus undertook his voyages across the Atlantic. In his important study of blacks in classical antiquity, for example, Frank Snowden notes that while the "exact number of Ethiopians who entered the Greco-Roman world as a result of military, diplomatic, and commercial activity is difficult to determine . . . all the evidence suggests a sizable Ethiopian element, especially in the population of the Roman world."³ In the parlance of the time, the term "Ethiopian" was a synonym for black Africans. The aforementioned three Diasporic streams from what I shall call the premodern African Diaspora.

The fourth major African Diasporic stream, and the one that is most widely studied today, is associated with the Atlantic trade in African slaves. This trade, which began in earnest in the 15th century, may have delivered as many as 200,000 Africans to various European societies and 11 to 12 million to the Americas over time. The fifth major stream began during the 19th century particularly after slavery's demise in the Americas and continues to our own times. It is characterized by the movement of Africans and peoples of African descent among, and their resettlement in, various societies. These latter two Diasporic streams, along with several substreams and the communities that emerged, constitute the modern African Diaspora. Unlike the premodern Diaspora, "racial" oppression and resistance to it are two of its most salient features.

The five major Diasporic streams (or four if the first is excluded) that I have identified do not constitute the only significant movements of peoples of African descent within or outside of the African continent. Scholars, depending on their perspectives, should identify other major streams or substreams, such as that resulting from the desiccation of the Sahara between 2500 B.C.E. and 2300 B.C.E., or the movement of peoples from East Africa to the Middle East and Asia during the era of the Atlantic slave trade and after. They should make sure, however, that these streams are not conflated in terms of their timing, scope, and nature. It should be stressed that it is these Diasporic streams--or movements of specific peoples to several societies--together with the communities that they constructed, that form a Diaspora. The construction of a Diaspora, then, is an organic process involving movement from an ancestral land, settlement in new lands, and sometimes renewed movement and resettlement elsewhere. The various stages of this process are interrelated, yet discrete.

Although Diasporas involve the movement of a particular people to several places at once or over time, a migration is usually of a more limited scope and duration, and essentially is the movement of individuals from one point to another within a polity or outside of it. The boundaries between the two processes are, to be sure, very elastic because Diasporas are the products of several migratory streams. Thus, the contemporary movement of Jamaicans to England is a migration, but it also constitutes a part of the fifth Diasporic stream identified in this essay.

Diasporic communities, generally speaking, possess a number of characteristics. Regardless of their location, members of a Diaspora share an emotional attachment to their ancestral land, are cognizant of their dispersal and, if conditions warrant, of their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside. 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 sometimes to articulate a desire to return to their original homeland. No Diasporic community manifests all of these characteristics or shares with the same intensity an identity with its scattered ancestral kin. In many respects, Diasporas are not actual but imaginary and symbolic communities and political constructs; it is we who often call them into being.

It is also useful in this context to remind ourselves that the appellation "African" was a misnomer until very recent times. Because, generally speaking, the peoples of Africa traditionally embraced an ethnic identification in contradistinction to a trans-ethnic, regional, or continentally based one, it is more historically accurate to speak of Yoruba, Akan, or Malinke Diasporas for much of the period up to the late 19th century or even later. The issue becomes even more complicated when one recognizes that individuals also moved from one society in Africa to another for a variety of reasons including being captured in war. Because an African or transethnic consciousness did not exist, the people who left their ethnic homeland were, strictly speaking, residing "abroad." Should such internal movements of specific peoples in Africa be considered parts of a Diasporic stream? Can we speak of an African Diaspora before the late 19th or 20th century since the subjects of our study did not define themselves as African but as Yoruba, Wolof, Igbo, or other? Equally important, what demographic, temporal, or other boundaries should be imposed on the concept?

Clearly, a major problem that scholars of the modern African Diaspora confront is how to make a case for the contours and nature of their subject. This may not be very easy, as the preceding observations suggest. The difficulty notwithstanding, I hope to initiate a scholarly debate by attempting a definition of the modern African Diaspora because it is the one that is currently receiving the most attention. This Diaspora possesses some of the characteristics that I mentioned, but as the following tentative definition implies, it has its unique features.

The modern African Diaspora, at its core, consists of the millions of peoples of African descent living in various societies who are united by a past based significantly but not exclusively upon "racial" oppression and the struggles against it; and who, despite the cultural variations and political and other divisions among them, share an emotional bond with one another and with their ancestral continent; and who also, regardless of their location, face broadly similar problems in constructing and realizing themselves.⁴

This definition rejects any notion of a sustained desire to emigrate to Africa by those of its peoples who currently live outside of that continent's boundaries, although groups such as the Rastafarians sometimes articulate such a desire. The desire to return to Africa, to be sure, was articulated by many of the enslaved who were removed from that continent, and thousands of free African Americans left for Liberia during the 19th century. Men such as Henry Highland Garnet, Henry McNeal Turner, Marcus Garvey, and others actively embraced emigration to Africa at various times but the appeal of the continent as a place to reestablish roots seems to have waned over time.

Methodologically speaking, the study of the modern African Diaspora should, in my opinion, begin with the study of Africa. The African continent--the ancestral homeland--must be central to any informed analysis and understanding of the dispersal of its peoples. Not only must the programs that are designed promote an understanding of the history and nature of the variegated African cultures, but it must be recognized that the peoples who left Africa and their ethnic group, coerced or otherwise, brought their cultures, ideas, and worldviews with them as well.

Africa, in all of its cultural richness and diversity, remained very much alive in the receiving societies as the various ethnic groups created new cultures and recreated their old ways as circumstances allowed. Consequently, the study of the modern African Diaspora, particularly the aspect of it that is associated with the Atlantic slave trade, cannot be justifiably separated from the study of the home continent.

Scholars must be careful not to homogenize the experiences of the diverse peoples of the modern Diaspora. There are obviously certain commonalities, but there are fundamental differences born of the societal context, the times, the political, economic, and "racial" circumstances, and so on. North American scholars in particular must avoid the temptation to impose paradigms that reflect their own experiences upon other areas of the Diaspora. I am, in effect, suggesting that we ask different kinds of questions that will more accurately inform our understanding of the peoples of a Diaspora who are simultaneously similar but yet different. Scholars of the modern Diaspora must also make a methodological distinction between studying the trajectory of a people and the trajectory of the nation-state in which they reside. In many cases, including the United States, England, and Canada, the history of marginalized blacks who occupy a minority status is not coterminous with the history of the nation-state. The history of black America is certainly not a carbon copy of that of the larger polity. In the case of those societies in which peoples of African descent constitute the majority or exercise political and other forms of power, the issues are more complex. The scholar not only has to examine how a people realized themselves over time in specific contexts but how they began the task of constructing nation states as well. Obviously, the histories and experiences of peoples of African descent in such societies as Jamaica, Haiti, and Barbados, where they comprise the overwhelming majority, cannot be conflated with those of their counterparts in England, Germany, Canada, or Mexico, where they form a distinct minority. The differences are too vast. In societies such as Brazil and Cuba where the peoples of African descent may be in the majority but do not exercise political power commensurate with their number, the questions that are asked must be appropriate to their circumstances. Finally, we must be careful not to paint a static and ahistorical picture of what was and is a very dynamic set of processes at work everywhere.

Historians and other scholars should also adopt with the utmost caution the term "Black Atlantic" (recently popularized by Paul Gilroy) as a synonym for the modern African Diaspora. Not only does this appellation exclude such societies as those in the Indian Ocean that are not a part of the Atlantic basin, but there are fundamental differences in the historical experiences of the peoples of the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic and within those zones as well. If the appellation Black Atlantic is to be adopted, scholars must resist any tendency to homogenize and conflate the histories of these variegated peoples whose memories are still haunted by the ocean that is so associated with the travail of their ancestors. Not too long ago, some scholars used the term "Plantation America" to characterize the peoples of African descent in the Americas, in contrast to those who were called Euro-Americans and Indo-Americans. Unlike the Caucasians and the Indians, blacks as people were rendered invisible by this terminology and defined according to a particular economic arrangement.

Although the adjective "Black" suggests that people are included in the "Black Atlantic" construct, I am still concerned that the term lends itself to some of the same kinds of criticisms that were leveled at the use of "Plantation America." In addition, if a general nomenclature is needed for the peoples of African descent living in the Atlantic basin, it should emerge from their complex and unique internal experiences, their sinews and deep structures. Seen in this light, the Atlantic Ocean is of questionable value as the signifier of a people's trajectory and the core of their history. Similarly, if a "Black Atlantic" exists, is there an oppositional "White Atlantic," and if so, what are its animating features? The term "Africology" that is now being embraced by some to mean the study of the peoples of African descent also suggests a kind of "racial" or ethnic essentialism that should be questioned. Obviously, the temptation to reify "race" or ethnicity as the impetus for a people's motions in a Diaspora as opposed to deeper and more universal structural forces should be avoided.⁵

The point that I should like to emphasize is that new fields require new methodologies, and it is unacceptable for scholars to see the modern African Diaspora as a replica of other Diasporas or as black American, black British, or Caribbean history writ large. The field must embrace disciplinary and interdisciplinary orientations and must, perforce, be comparative in its methodological dimensions. Scholars, arguably, cannot and should not define themselves as Diaspora specialists if their area of expertise is confined to one society, or worse, to one small corner of that society. More than anything else, we need at this stage new and provocative questions that seek to illuminate the processes at work among the peoples of African descent who are still continuing to construct themselves and command their destinies. African Diaspora studies, as we shape this developing field, must be subjected to the same kind of methodological rigor as any other area of knowledge, free from romantic condescension, essentialism, and distracting fads. For a start, let us see if we can arrive at a broad agreement on the meaning of the modern African Diaspora, and then we can embrace and promote our diverse interpretive stances.

Notes

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2. For a discussion of the African origins issue, see Christopher Stringer and Robin McKie, *African Exodus: The Origins of Modern Humanity* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996).
3. Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 184. See also St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, 1990).

4. This definition owes a great deal to the efforts of my students at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, who enrolled in my spring 1997 course, "Social Movements in the African Diaspora during the Twentieth Century."

5. This question was originally raised by Samuel K. Roberts Jr., a graduate student at Princeton.