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African Diaspora Studies: Some Trends and Challenges

By Joseph E. Harris

18 The concept of the African diaspora embodies the essence of the historical connection between Africans and people of African descent abroad. Included in this concept are three components: 1, the global dispersion, forced and voluntary, of Africans from ancient times to the present; 2, their settlement in adopted lands without the loss of their African identity; 3, the physical or psychological return to the homeland—Africa.

In recent years African studies in general, and African historiography in particular, have witnessed an increased emphasis on the historical connection between Africans and Afro-Americans (North, Central and South American). Evidence of this trend is seen in a growing number of conferences and books focusing on African/Afro-Americans interrelations in Pan Africanism. But only recently has serious scholarly attention been directed to a host of networks between Africans and Afro-Americans quite apart from Pan Africanism as traditionally understood in political terms. Several of the works of George Shepperson and St. Clair Drake confirm this point.

This fall, the Howard University Press will release the book, *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, a collection of 24 papers presented at the First African Diaspora Studies Institute at Howard University in 1979. This volume, which includes pieces by both Drake and Shepperson, assesses the concept and methodologies of the African diaspora, presents case studies, and provides a perceptive description of personal experiences by scholars and practitioners of Pan Africanism.

What is particularly significant about the volume is that it not only presents serious pieces by African scholars who used local oral and written sources to reconstruct African/Afro-American interrelations in African societies, but includes evidence of contact through individuals

and organizations over many years without any conscious political ideologies. That is a reflection of what St. Clair Drake characterizes as pan Africanism, with a small "p." Church groups, educational projects, personal visits were part of that phenomenon, as well as financial and other kinds of contributions on the part of Afro-Americans.

Much of the momentum for this new exploratory approach has come from conferences convened by UNESCO and Howard University.

The UNESCO meeting of experts on "The Cultures of the Caribbean," which convened at Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, September 1978, addressed a number of important issues. But an item of particular relevance adopted at the conference was that "the African presence which was often ignored or minimized, should be unequivocally admitted to whatever definition formulated by the conference, since it is the axis around which the whole contemporary Caribbean culture was built up." This view epitomized the thrust of the concern for African diaspora studies in the Caribbean.

The Howard Connection

The First African Diaspora Studies Institute, which convened at Howard University in August 1979, examined the status of research and teaching in African diaspora studies in Africa and the Americas and explored the possibility of strengthening links between African and American scholars in the field. Delegates from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States discussed the following relevant issues: conceptual and contextual framework, methodological issues, historical and geopolitical scope.

The delegates concluded the conference by including the following among their recommendations:

- That a follow-up conference should be convened within 2-3 years.
- That a newsletter or journal be launched in African diaspora studies and be made available to all African and other interested persons.
- That means be found to provide resource scholars and library materials to support the development of African diaspora studies at African universities.

In January 1980, the Director General of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, called on participants of a conference held in Barbados on The African Cultural Pres-

ence in the Caribbean and in North and South America "to define and give specificity to the scope, contours and socio-cultural context of the African diaspora." He also asked them to recommend research projects and other activities for UNESCO's involvement.

The following key proposals were submitted by the delegates at the conference:

- The integration of studies on the African diaspora in school programs of American countries.
 - The translation and distribution to interested institutions of relevant material on the African cultural presence in the Caribbean and in the Americas.
 - The encouragement of radio stations to broadcast programs relating to the African diaspora and Black culture.
 - The contribution to the preparation of a general history of the African peoples in the Americas and in the Caribbean.
- The following are two of the formulas proposed for the achievement of the conference's objectives.
- Creation of a cultural association whose members should come from Africa and the African diaspora.
 - Establishment of an advisory committee to identify, select and supervise the publication and translation of basic documents, archival sources, relevant books, and to co-ordinate the distribution of this material.

The 1979 conference at Howard paved the way for the Second African Diaspora Studies Institute which convened at the University of Nairobi in 1981. Nearly 100 delegates assessed the status of research and teaching in African diaspora studies, presented papers on selected topics in the field, examined syllabi and research checklists from several African countries, and considered ways of continuing the collective contact.

The Nairobi Conference

The Nairobi conference recognized that effective teaching requires research and one of the problems of teaching diaspora studies at universities in Africa is the paucity of documentation. However, that limitation may have been exaggerated. A number of African delegates had investigated the holdings in their national archives to determine the extent of available sources for research. They prepared checklists which were discussed at the conference. Those checklists iden-

tified a number of Afro-American immigrants in several African countries from the 19th century to the present. In addition, documents revealed that the influence of Marcus Garvey was much greater than indicated by any previous study, especially for French-speaking Africa.

The data from those and other sources would support individual and collaborative research to locate points of settlement of Afro-Americans in Africa, and also facilitate an examination of the ways in which those immigrants were received by specific host societies, the processes and results of adjustment, and the degree of impact on African development.

Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that Afro-Americans helped in the transfer of administrative and technical skills and ideas which helped in the development of a number of African societies. It is also clear that Afro-Americans returned to the Americas with influences from the homeland. Studies concentrated on these types of issues would greatly enhance our understanding of African and American history and culture; they also represent a means of establishing links between African and American universities.

The Nairobi conference clearly reflected a keen interest in African diaspora studies on the part of the delegates. Indeed, the delegates from Malawi and Zambia reported that their universities had adopted a course on the African diaspora. The University of Zambia also introduced a course on United States history. The University of Zimbabwe's delegate stated that he had introduced a course on "The African Experience in the Diaspora" and he planned to establish a course on slavery within a year. Other African universities have witnessed the expansion of traditional courses to include diaspora content and perspectives. The University of Calabar in Nigeria continues to lead the way among African universities in the number of courses on the diaspora.

African interest in this field is accompanied by appeals for assistance. Most African scholars were not trained in the subject and are thus uneasy about teaching it. Several delegates suggested the formulation of a program of African diaspora studies at universities in the United States, with fellowships for African students. Another suggestion was that summer institutes be conducted in Africa to train faculty already holding positions at African universities.

At the final session of the conference the delegates voted to organize as the International African Diaspora Studies Association. A committee chaired by the writer was elected on a geographical basis to provide continuity for the group, prepare proposals for organizational structure, and explore the feasibility of holding another conference, establishing a research institute and publishing a newsletter.

The idea of a newsletter was first presented at the Howard conference in 1979 and later at the Barbados meeting in 1980. UNESCO has since agreed to fund a pilot project for a newsletter in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese—with a constituency primarily in the Americas, Europe and Africa. The newsletter, to be produced by a Howard University faculty committee, will seek to identify works which should be translated and distributed in different parts of the world; contain reports on relevant developments in communities in different countries; announce itineraries of scholars, writers, performers and others in the field; and in general support the development of an international network of specialists and interested lay persons around the world.

To date letters of interest in the newsletter project have come from individuals in 35 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, the United States and Canada. The first issue is scheduled to appear next year.

Diaspora Institutes

The objectives of the two African Diaspora Institutes, the African Diaspora Studies Association and the newsletter project constitute a major challenge and a new direction in the study of the African/Afro-American connection. There is a heightened awareness that African people have become an integral and extended part of a world in which momentous economic and intellectual forces continue to reshape political, social and economic structures, thereby causing re-orientations of perspectives and realignment of constituencies. By both their presence and actions in the midst of a Euro-American dominated system, men and women of African descent continue to influence and be influenced by decisions of Euro-Americans.

As part of that phenomenon, Africans in the diaspora, among other things, contributed to the development and appreciation of that significant concept of the

nation-state in Africa. At a time when most continental Africans defined their societies primarily along ethnic and family lines—and Europeans defined them as "barbarous tribes"—several Afro-Americans promoted the idea of nation-state in Africa as both an end result and a means of challenging derogatory stereotypes about African people with respect to their ability to govern, survive, and progress.

It was within that context that Africans abroad supported the liberation of Haiti, the repatriation experiments of Sierra Leone and Liberia, the expulsion of the Italians from Ethiopia, and the freedom movements of 20th century Africa. Diaspora Africans became pioneer teachers, civil servants, journalists, physicians, and engineers throughout much of Africa. They shared their limited resources abroad for the education of continental Africans, and their ideas later inspired freedom struggles throughout the Black world.

It is especially significant that those ideas and actions as applied to Africa by Blacks at that time were innovative and provided a basis for an evolving consciousness of Black identity in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa.

But noteworthy though that was, the sense of national and transnational development, which diaspora Africans had, incorporated African and Western values and posed dilemmas which we continue to face. We must therefore be careful not to exaggerate the role of diaspora Africans and we certainly must evaluate any positive and negative influence they had. Serious analytic attention should be devoted to the tradition of linkage between Africa and the diaspora.

Diaspora Africans

Diaspora Africans in Asia, Europe, and the Americas could not escape the influence of their physical and social environment abroad. Their languages and lifestyles changed; their values and goals were modified. Yet, Yoruba is still spoken in parts of Brazil; traces of several African languages persist in Guyana and Surinam and in the islands of the southeastern United States; while Swahili survives in parts of India. Creole emerged in several African and diaspora areas. Traces of African religion and influences of African art, literature and music exist in the diaspora. And what is also important is the strength to be

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month to a Black Development Venture Capital Fund. We have been successful in getting payroll deductions for contributions to a United Black Fund to meet the needs of the poor; let us do the same for our economic development.

A Black Economic Development Fund could be organized on these same principles, with the funds amassed from individual contributions becoming the seed money for private enterprises. If each person contributed but \$1.00 per month, the resulting \$300 million could be leveraged to upwards of \$1.5 billion in investment capital each year. Carefully and prudently managed, such a fund could contribute significantly to the size and success of Black businesses and employment.

The problems with developing such a fund are formidable indeed, but they are not insurmountable. First, our people would have to be convinced of the need for, and importance of, this kind of a program. To obtain their trust and support for such a venture, a board of directors made up of prominent Black leaders would be needed. I'm thinking here of about six regional funds with six regional boards.

To assure our people that their contributions would not be lost or wasted, this fund would need to have as management officers competent businessmen, economists and lawyers. This fund would have to walk a fine line between hard financial analysis and advice, and sensitivity to the special needs of promising Black businessmen. It would have to work with, and to a large extent, through existing Black financial institutions and venture capital firms.

These are serious problems, and it will take much effort and cooperation to achieve them. But, the clear advantages of being able to control our economic destinies in this way make me believe that we can move in this direction.

This alone, however, does not solve the problem of small and minority business capital formation. At present, the tax laws

discourage equity participation in, and venture financing of, small and especially minority businesses. We will need to work for changes in the tax laws that will provide these enterprises with the same access to capital that large companies now enjoy, and that will encourage Black people to make investments in Black ventures. Such changes would multiply the benefits from a Black Economic Development Fund by encouraging the entrepreneurial activities that such a fund can support.

So there you have it, two possible solutions: A Black Economic Development Fund, and a Revitalization or National Development Bank.

Conclusion

Organizing and obtaining the Black community's support for a Black Economic Development Fund will require recommitment to the goals of full economic freedom for Black people. Obtaining the Federal programs for industrial development will require overcoming the opposition from those who want to roll back the Federal government's economic and social activities to what they were before the New Deal.

If we join together with other people of reason and goodwill, we will begin to reverse the trend of official indifference and callousness. We can bring about the programs and assistance that are so vitally needed to provide jobs and job opportunities to all Americans. □

Walter Fauntroy represents the District of Columbia in Congress. The above was excerpted from a July 26, 1982 presentation at the National Summit Conference on Black Economic Development & Survival, in Gary, Indiana.

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derived from the powerful set of cohesive historical conditions which helped to cement global bonds among African people.

The times and cast of characters have changed over the centuries, but in some ways, the challenge today is similar to that of the past, a situation in which Africa's political, strategic, and economic resources weigh heavily in the decisions of world policy-makers, and this fact makes even more important the existence of diaspora African communities in world centers of power. That fact underlines the critical nature of linkage between African people throughout the world. For in the struggle for world equity and peace, it would be a great mistake for any power in Africa or elsewhere to ignore the implications of those natural, and historical links.

Thus, the study of the African diaspora must be understood as an ongoing, historic and dynamic phenomenon influencing and influenced by relationships and events in global context. □