

# Forging A New Future: Africa and her Diaspora

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In the process of being arrested by colonial authorities in 1953, Jomo Kenyatta, future president of independent Kenya hurriedly scribbled on an envelope, “Please send to Moshi for my lawyer, Dudley Thompson” (Thompson, 1993, p.93). When this Jamaican lawyer rose in court to defend Kenyatta, it was emblematic in many respects of the bonds between Africa and its diaspora, that was forged in the crucible of the colonial experiment. While Africa’s diaspora is global, its largest and most prominent manifestation exists in the Americas and not surprisingly, most of the diasporan influence on the continent have emanated from this region. From even before the post-war years, the diaspora played an active role in shaping Africa’s futures especially in the political arena. The influence of Marcus Garvey was instrumental in fomenting resistance to apartheid and colonialism in South Africa (see for example, Vinson, 2012). This ideology also found a place for expression in many of the first leaders of post-independent Africa such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Patrice Lumumba of the Republic of Congo, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria and the afore-mentioned Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. Consequently, the diaspora has been shaping Africa’s future since decolonization, a process which continues in tangible ways today, and by all indications, has future ramifications on the continent.

Africa has always held a central place in world history and the contest among European powers for the continent’s resources placed Africa under colonial domination for the greater part of the 20th century. The continent played active supporting roles in both world wars and was reluctantly released from the colonial grip during decolonization, that effectively began at the end of World War II. While a wave of independence swept through the continent beginning in the late 1950’s, Africa remained in the political spotlight as a place to be contested for by industrialized nations within context of the political rhetoric that characterised the Cold War between the only two superpowers, the United States (US) and the Soviet Union (USSR). It is within this general context that Africa’s diaspora constantly negotiated and renegotiated the continent’s future, shaping the continent in a way that would ensure its emancipation from the prevailing political and economic depredations of the western world.

Pan-Africanism was the first medium that transported these aims of the diaspora to the continent. This ideal was formed in the diaspora as disparate Africans were forced to cultivate a composite notion of togetherness that would alleviate their oppressive conditions in the West. The key component of this was the idea of forging an identity that transcended language and culture and see Africans as one people. This of course was not an easy task considering the complex nature of African cultures, but for those outside of Africa, it was an immediate solution to a common oppression that they all faced. While the actual authorship of pan-Africanism itself, can be debated, it is widely accepted as being from the African diaspora and some of its prominent early exponents and practitioners were Edward Wilmot Blyden, Henry Sylvester Williams, Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B. DuBois. While pan-Africanism developed in the diaspora, its leadership and articulation in Africa was effectively controlled by Africans living on the continent. This shift is marked by the 5th Pan African Congress held in Manchester, England in 1945, where Kwame Nkrumah transformed the notion of pan-Africanism from a “Diaspora affair in which a few continental Africans participated to an African affair in which the Diaspora continued to contribute” (Fergus, 2010, p.29).

Perhaps the most overt expression of the Pan Africanism ethos in the way of shaping Africa’s futures is

demonstrated by the existence of the African Union (AU). This body seeks to address various challenges facing the African continent with the view of improving the conditions of African peoples, *vis a vis* security, human rights, environmental sustainability, and gender equity among other things (Makinda, 2016, p.1). The AU attempts to produce an organization that speaks for the continent on important matters, much like how the later European Union attempt to represent and deal with major issues concerning Europe. The African Union however, owes its existence to the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) that emerged as a direct result of the pan-African ethos with which newly independent African countries in the 1960s were imbued. Established in 1962 in Addis Ababa, the OAU had among its aims: the promotion of unity among African states, to defend the independence of African states, and to eradicate colonialism on the continent (OAU, 1963, p.41). The OAU can be understood as an outgrowth of a social movement towards African unity (Wallerstein, 1966, p.774). The African unity component of the OAU underscored the presence and importance of pan-Africanism. The OAU operated until 2001 when it was replaced by its successor, the AU.

How then has the OAU/AU shaped Africa and is continuing to affect the future of the continent? The OAU provided emerging independent African countries with a sense of stability and somewhat of an economic and political countermeasure to balance the influence of Europe on the continent. For example, the OAU initiated financial institutions like the African Development Bank in 1963. The OAU also mediated border disputes between members as in the case of Algeria and Morocco in 1963 and between Somalia and neighbours Kenya and Ethiopia in 1964 (Wallerstein, 1966, p.780-781). This organization also actively supported liberation movements in countries like Guinea Bissau and Mozambique by providing funding (Yousuf, 1985, p. 57). This was no doubt in keeping with their stated aim of eradicating colonialism on the African continent. Despite this however, both the OAU and its successor the AU, struggled and failed with throttling the scourge of apartheid on the continent. Serendipitously, this failure presented the African diaspora with an opportunity to insert their agency in Africa by galvanizing to present a valuable component that ended apartheid.

Agitations to bring attention to the apartheid situation in South Africa, came from all sections of the diaspora. There were rallies, demonstrations, concerts, and lectures aimed at challenging the support by western countries of the apartheid regime in South Africa. The most effective of these challenges emanated from Latin America in the form of Cuba's involvement. The participation of Cuban troops that included diasporans, in African liberation struggles in southern Africa, finally broke the military might of the apartheid regime while bringing the civil war in Angola to a conclusion (Laumann, 2013, p.32-33). Despite the looming presence of Cold War influences in the support of, and opposition to the apartheid regime, the leadership of Cuba decided to directly intervene in the military struggle by sending materiel and thousands of troops to southern Africa. The importance of the diaspora in toppling apartheid was underscored in Nelson Mandela's visit to Cuba where he expressed his gratitude to the people of that country. Ironically, the largest diaspora from Africa resides in Brazil where they have had limited impact on Africa. The members of this diaspora in Brazil are mostly marginalized along a sharp racial divide that limit their agency and mostly exclude them from the corridors of power. Historically however, the diaspora in Brazil did produce members that made their way back to Africa and left their mark in the narrative of the continent's history, even serving to create a distinct ethnicity in West Africa (see Alcione, 2001; Essien, 2016).

The diaspora is dynamic, evolving and continuing to shape Africa today through this pan-African ethos. Recently, the AU designated and the diaspora as the 6th region of Africa. This demonstrates the AU's efforts to reinvigorate a brand of pan Africanism aimed at developing "a common understanding and connection among African nations and African descended peoples cross-continentially and globally (Edozie, 2012, p.270). This is quite poignant as it now allows many diasporans, generations removed from Africa, to feel like they officially belong to the continent even

without holding a passport from any country or even having visited. It clears the way ideologically and, in some ways, administratively for members of the African diaspora to better see themselves as Africans and contribute towards the development of the continent. This, combined with efforts from within individual countries presents Africa in a more accessible light to those in the diaspora who want to and are able to contribute to the continent's growth. In Ghana for example there is an established practice of bestowing honorary traditional titles on individuals from outside the continent who can provide usually financial means to facilitate development (Bob-Milliar, 2009).

The evolution of the African diaspora also carries implications for the future of Africa. Apart from the 700-year period where Africans occupied parts of the Iberian Peninsula, the African diaspora for the most part was evolved from the trafficking of Africans for the purposes of enslavement. The constituent of the diaspora is now radically different as it is not made up exclusively of slave descendants. Millions of Africans have made the choice to travel and live outside of Africa for numerous reasons, primarily economic ones. The diaspora today therefore, boasts a large number of persons who came directly from the continent or who are first generation Africans. The implication of this is that there is now a stronger sense of what Africa is in the diaspora, and there is also a need to be connected to it as these diasporans return to the continent for family occasions, vacations, to explore business ventures, or to prepare for retirement there. This has resulted in the transfer of many things from outside Africa to Africa, and in this case the transference is more readily accepted as it is being brought by Africans who had spent time abroad, or by their children with a strong sense of home, rather than by long lost cousins, generations removed from, and who have little in common culturally with Africans living on the continent.

Within this paradigm, the diaspora is uniquely positioned to shape Africa's future in many ways. Already, African migrants are the most educated demographic in the United States (US). In addition, the African diaspora has already laid claim to a US president, Barack Obama, and Oscar winner Lupita Nyong'o. What can this mean for Africa in terms of how the diaspora will shape and continue to shape the continent's future? The increased visibility and significance of members of the African diaspora have in turn created a new understanding of the continent by others in the diaspora and have influenced the positioning of Africa as a site for tourism among many other diasporans. This in turn have fuelled the growth of Afro-futurism and a new appreciation for the African aesthetic. This was most notably displayed in the blockbuster film *Black Panther*. With the success of this film, members of the African diaspora have already started to wear more African inspired fashion, which could have a positive economic ripple effect on the continent. Already, in US society, it has become a tradition for many black college graduates to adorn themselves in stoles made from woven kente material at their graduation ceremonies.

Africa's cultural landscape is also being shaped by the diaspora, a trend which is only set to intensify in the future. Africa today boasts a burgeoning film industry with its primary audience being continental as well as Africans in the diaspora. Thousands of these films, notably from Nigeria have found willing audiences in abroad. The acceptance and popularity of these Nollywood productions—as the movie industry in Nigeria is called—in turn have further stimulated a proliferation of these movies to meet the increased demand for these products. It is fair to say that the growth of the African movie industry is directly linked to appreciation of these productions by the diaspora who are usually in a better economic matrix and is able to support the purchase of these films. The diaspora is also a major player in the evolution of the African music scene. Today, the continent rocks to the sound of reggae and hip hop, two music genres that emanated from the African diaspora. These two genres have influenced musicians on the continent to develop their own sound and have marketed their product all over the world. Reggae music especially, has fostered the spread of the Rastafari movement that has adherents all over the continent. It's message of fierce independence and resisting oppression will continue to shape the general outlook of urban youths on the continent, especially the disenfranchised.

The diaspora is resonating and will continue to do so in Africa's fiscal arena. In most cases, Africans in the diaspora are generally in a more advanced economic position than Africans on the continent. This is not surprising since Africans often migrate from the continent for economic reasons. The diaspora thus presents a natural market of willing consumers for African goods, especially foodstuff and services such as custom-made clothing. The demand in the diaspora for African products, will continue to stimulate exports and innovative ways of marketing as demand grows with an expanding diaspora. Recent African migrants, who compose the new diaspora are significant players in education, business, and technology in the west. In returning to Africa, they often found private schools modelled along the line of western institutions with the intention of offering a similar education product to that of western countries. Members of the diaspora are also making their presence felt on the continent as they return to contribute to Africa's emerging business climate marked by expanding oil and telecommunications industries and the recent entry of China as a major investor on the continent. Perhaps the most significant way that the diaspora is shaping Africa's future in the economic arena is through direct cash remittances. The World Bank estimates that in 2016, remittances to sub-Saharan Africa alone stood at 33 billion (Worldbank.org, 2018). These remittances feature quite significantly in the economy of several African countries with less advanced economies like Liberia and The Gambia, where remittances account for upwards of 20% of their GDP (Worldbank.org, 2018).

In conclusion, Africa's diaspora is perhaps its most well-known product and its most significant product in terms of how this diaspora have shaped and continues to shape Africa's future. Africa's diaspora was forged by the need to unite in order to cope with oppressive conditions that faced Africans, regardless of their cultural origin. This pan-African ethos was successfully transferred to Africa to cope with its own oppression under colonial domination. Pan-Africanism informed how post-colonial leaders envisioned and fashioned independent Africa and is exemplified in the OAU and the AU, the organization that is the most overt political expression of pan-Africanism on the continent. The diaspora helped to topple the scourge of apartheid and continues to reverberate in the continent's cultural and economic arenas. The diaspora is a driver of cultural development and simultaneously an active market for Africa's cultural production. In addition, the diaspora is a key component of the continent's economic landscape by funnelling money through remittances that is crucial to many economies. The nature and reach of the African diaspora enables it to continue its role as a major and effective player in determining the continent's future with the same level of importance, if not more, than it had in shaping Africa's post-colonial past.

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