Africa and Its Diasporas: From Pan-Africanism to Developmentalism to Transnationalism

By Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

Studies of Africa and its diasporas have largely been framed through the paradigms of Pan-Africanism and developmentalism. The persistent and pressing demands of Pan-African unity and African development have increasingly privileged the engagements of the new extra-continental diasporas that have grown rapidly and eclipsed previous preoccupations with the historic diasporas that remain globally dominant.

The former number more than 15 million and the latter nearly 200 million, the largest number being in Brazil with approximately 97 million, the United States with 43 million, and the Caribbean with 28 million. In 2020, Africa had 40.6 million emigrants (14.5% of the world total of 280.6 million), Asia (114.9 million (40.9%), Europe 63.3 million (22.6%), Americas 47.2 million (16.8%), and Oceania 2 million (1.1%). Twenty-five million of the continent’s international emigrants lived on the continent representing 1.9% of the population. Globally, emigrants represented 3.6% of the world population up from 2.8% in 2000 (or 183 million).

This data underscores that despite widespread hysteria the share of international migrants remains small, Africa lags behind Asia in international migration, and the bulk of African emigrants reside in
other African countries; 7.4 million of them are refugees second to Asia’s 16.2 million, followed by Europe with 2.9 million, and the Americas 1.1 million. This requires more nuanced analysis of African diasporas as both extra-continental and intra-continental.

While both the historic and new diasporas are invested in Africa, their imaginaries of Africa and modalities of engagement with the continent vary. The divergences in analyses of the two groups are constructed and reinforced in the disciplinary gulf between African studies and development studies identified by Alfred Zack-Williams in 1995. He bemoaned development studies ignores “questions of race and cultural identity,” while diaspora studies “tend to focus on cultural and racial links with Africa to the exclusion of questions of political economy.” His appeal was only partly answered as scholarship on diaspora and development blossomed. However, the focus was largely on the contributions of the new diasporas to African development.

The question remains: how do we create an analytical balance between the new and historical diasporas, the cultural and developmentalist imperatives of diaspora engagements, merge the epistemic foci and inquiries from African studies, development studies, and diaspora studies? In my work over the last two decades, I have tried to map out the historical dynamics and global dimensions of African diaspora formations, flows, and activities that encompass both the historic and new diasporas across Afro-Asia, Afro-Europe, and Afro-America and the multiplicity of domains of their engagements with the continent.

I am increasingly drawn to the insights that may be derived from international relations perspectives in so far as diasporas emerge out of transnational processes and phenomena that are engendered and transformed by the interplay of the structures of globalized and racialized capitalism and the human agency of its subjects including the diasporas themselves. This is the focus of my presentation. I will begin by making brief notes on the Pan-African and developmentalist imperatives in African diaspora studies that we are all familiar with, then turn to the role of the new diasporas, and conclude with key analytical frameworks in international relations that might fruitfully expand the exploration of linkages between Africa and its diasporas.

**The Pan-Africanist and Developmentalist Imperatives**

Pan-Africanism as an idea, philosophy, and movement was developed in the diasporas of today’s global North. It was an ideology of racial solidarity and resistance against the denigration and subjugation of African peoples in the Euroamerican capitalist world spawned by enslavement and colonialism. African peoples in the diaspora were the first to systematically experience racialized oppression. They were homogenized and came to see themselves as one people earlier than peoples on the continent divided as they were into different colonial states and enveloped in the various social identities of ethnicity, religion, and culture.

Moreover, in the 19th and early 20th centuries educational opportunities were better developed in the diaspora than on the continent which facilitated immersion in global political discourses of nationalism, socialism, liberalism, and human rights through which Pan-Africanism was articulated. Out of diaspora Pan-Africanism were incubated continental Pan-Africanism and territorial nationalisms propagated by the founding presidents of several African states who were socialized and politicized in diaspora institutions and communities. They include Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, Nigeria’s Nnandi Azikiwe, and Malawi’s Kamuzu Banda who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States. Other leaders in British, French, and Portuguese colonies were schooled in the diaspora political and social milieus of their respective imperial metropoles.

Eventually, six versions of Pan-Africanism emerged: Trans-Atlantic Pan-Africanism that promoted connections between the continent and its diasporas across the Atlantic; Continental Pan-Africanism
that culminated in the formation of the OAU; Sub-Saharan Pan-Africanism that embraced the Eurocentric construct of Hegel’s “Africa proper” and the excision of North Africa; Pan-Arabism that envisaged North Africa in Gamal Abdel Nasser’s view as the center of Pan-African, Pan-Arab, and Pan-Islamic circles; Black Atlantic named after Paul Gilroy’s book that prioritizes intra-Atlantic diaspora relations excluding Africa; and what Ali Mazrui called Global Pan-Africanism that encompasses African diasporas everywhere in Afro-Asia, Afro-Europe, and Afro-America.

Following decolonization continental Pan-Africanism triumphed with the formation of the Organization of African University out of a historic compromise between conservative and progressive states grouped into the so-called Casablanca and Monrovia blocs, respectively. The nationalist project pursued what Thandika Mkandawire called five humanistic and historic tasks: decolonization, nation-building, development, democratization, and regional cooperation. The postcolonial state was under enormous pressure to rectify the huge economic, political, and social deformities and legacies of colonial underdevelopment and dependence.

Developmentalism became an all-encompassing drive, the altar at which the political class prayed and justified state intervention in the organization of economic, social, cultural, and political processes. Statism and developmentalism were reinforced by the drive for accumulation by the small indigenous capitalist class and the legitimacy imperatives of the state to deliver the fruits of “uhuru” as it mediated global capitalism and negotiated the Cold War. As the multiple contradictions and frustrations of the neocolonial order built on limited sovereignty, political posturing without economic power, and Africanization without genuine indigenization deepened and became more open, authoritarian developmentalism intensified. In Joseph Ki-Zerbo’s inimitable phrase, African populations were admonished: “Silence, Development in Progress!”

During the first phase of authoritarian developmentalism, African countries experienced relatively rapid rates of economic growth and development. Altogether, between 1960 and 1980 African economies grew by 4.8%, a rate that hides wide divergences between high growth, medium growth, and low growth economies, as well as between sectors. There were wide ideological divergences and disputes between states and regimes within states pursuing the capitalist and socialist paths of development or muddling through mixed economies, which were variously inspired by modernization, dependence, and Marxist perspectives. However, no model held a monopoly on rates of economic growth, and all states pursued developmentalism and fetishized development planning.

It was during the second phase of neo-liberal authoritarian developmentalism, 1980-2000, that brought Africa’s new diasporas into developmentalist discourse. The imposition of structural adjustment programs (SAPS) reflected the global ascendancy of neo-liberalism as an ideological response to the world economic crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s that ended the postwar boom. It marked the collapse of the Keynesian consensus and political coalitions that had sustained it, and the rise to power of conservative, ‘free’ market-oriented governments in the leading industrial economies. Neo-liberalism turned into triumphalism following the collapse of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s.

SAPs threatened to undo the developmental promises and achievements of independence, to dismantle the postcolonial social contract, to abort the nationalist project of Africa’s renewal. They were pursued with missionary zeal by the international financial institutions and western governments and accepted by hapless African states as part of conditionalities for balance of payments support. They called for currency devaluation, interest and exchange rate deregulation, liberalization of trade, privatization of state enterprises, withdrawal of public subsidies, and retrenchment of the public service (what Mkandawire labels getting prices right, governance right, property structures right, politics right, culture right, and policy ownership right).
The introduction of SAPs reflected the conjunction of interests between fractions of the national bourgeoisie keen to expand and global capital seeking to dismantle the post-war fetters of Keynesian capitalist regulation. SAPs were welcomed by fractions of the African capitalist class and were applied in the core capitalist countries themselves. The harsher consequences of SAPs for Africa and other countries in the global South reflected the enduring reality that economically weaker countries and the poorer classes always pay the highest price for capitalist restructuring.

This era coincided with the rise of globalization discourse characterized by celebrations and condemnations of the intensified flows of all manner of phenomena from capital, commodities, and culture, to images, ideologies, and institutions, to values, viruses, and violence, to people, plants, and pollutants. The emergence of African diaspora studies coincided with the spread of globalization studies, both of which gathered momentum in the 1990s and 2000s and reflected complex cross fertilizations with postmodernism and postcolonial studies.

The Role of the New Diasporas

African diasporas, especially the new international migrants, whose waves were generated by the ravages of neo-liberal restructuring, tend to be constituted and conceptualized as the “new diasporas.” They are perceived and analyzed through the complex prism of developmentalism, globalization, and diasporization. The discovery of “new diasporas” by governments, development agencies, civil society, and academics was premised on the mobilization of their political, economic, and social capitals, African international migration as an important feature of globalization, and lingering homage to the diaspora as a powerful force for Pan-Africanism.

I have written extensively on the histories of African diasporas, both the historic and new, and their complex, contradictory, and always changing political, economic, and cultural engagements with Africa. In 2005, I embarked on a project, funded by the Ford Foundation that took me to sixteen countries in the Americas, Europe, and Asia to map out the global dispersal of African peoples over the past millennium, the processes of diasporization in the different world regions, and the modalities of engagements between the various diasporas and Africa.

Later, in 2011-12, I undertook research for the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) on African born academics in Canada and the United States and how they work with higher education institutions on the continent. This resulted in the formation of the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program that by 2021 had sponsored nearly 500 fellows to more than 150 African universities. I regard this as part of “intellectual remittances” from the new diaspora to the continent. Reports and scholarly studies on diaspora financial remittances, philanthropy, and investment continue to mushroom.

A 2019 report by the African Development Bank affirms “Diaspora contributes positively, significantly and robustly to the improvement of real per capita income in Africa... Improvements in human capital, total factor productivity and democracy are effective transmission channels of this impact.” According to the World Bank’s Migration and Development Brief 33 published in October 2020 amid the COVID-19 crisis, global remittances were expected to decline by 7.2 percent, to $508 billion in 2020, followed by a further decline of 7.5 percent, to $470 billion, in 2021. This was due to increased unemployment which in many countries was more pronounced for non-native born immigrants, reduced immigration, and increased return migration.

However, remittances remained critical for low- and middle-income countries. In 2019 they had reached “a record high of $548 billion, larger than foreign direct investment (FDI) flows ($534 billion) and overseas development assistance (ODA), around $166 billion.” In 2020, the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa and the Middle East received $44 billion and $55 billion,
respectively, which was -8.8% and -8.5 below 2019. In 2019, African countries collectively were projected to receive $84.3 billion, led by Egypt with $26.4 billion (8.8% of GDP), Nigeria $25.4 billion (5.7% of GDP), Morocco $7.1 billion (5.8% of GDP), Ghana $3.7 billion (5.5% of GDP), Kenya $2.9 billion (2.9% of GDP), Senegal $2.5 billion (9.9% of GDP), and Tunisia $1.9 billion (5.3% of GDP).

As I have written elsewhere, the diasporas also serve as major philanthropic players and mobilize philanthropy in their countries of residence to the continent. Philanthropy is pronounced among the offspring of first-generation migrants and the historic diasporas. No less important is the deployment of human capital comprising temporary, permanent, and circulatory repatriation, as well as business investment ranging from purchasing equity or lending to local businesses to direct investment in industry and services. It is encouraging that plans are advanced to establish the African Diaspora Corporation (ADFC) to facilitate diaspora investment. It will “develop, issue and manage diaspora bonds and mutual funds, to harness and channel diaspora resources into socially responsible and impactful ventures.”

One recent study on the UK “demonstrates that the diasporas use the new knowledge, skills and wealth they have gained in the UK in tandem with support from trusted family, kinship and business ties at home to develop enterprises... institutional barriers which served as push factors that encouraged or forced migrants to leave their home countries to seek greener pastures abroad may later become pull factors that enable them to engage in diaspora entrepreneurship which is often characterized by paradoxes. Particularly, the informal institutions that constrain foreign investors can become assets for African diaspora entrepreneurs and help them set up new businesses and exploit market opportunities in Africa.” In this context, diaspora tourism seems to have special meaning for African descendants, enhances understanding, and brings economic benefits to local economies.

As for political, social, and cultural mobilization the historic and new diasporas play different and complimentary roles. I noted earlier, the role of Pan-Africanism in the development of territorial nationalisms. The involvement of both diasporas in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa is well documented. The new diasporas tend to gravitate to politics in their homelands in which they play complex and contradictory roles as purveyors of democratization and authoritarianism, perpetrators of conflicts and wars, and promoters of peacemaking and post-conflict reconstruction. Equally intriguing is the role of the diaspora in the transnationalization of old and new social movements, and brokering the growth of new forms of global interconnectedness and consciousness with Africanist inflections.

As I’ve written elsewhere, the cultural and social capitals of both the historic and new diasporas has been important in the development and globalization of African and diasporic cultural and creative industries, the construction, transmission, and performance of diaspora identities, the processes of digital diasporization, and the circulation of professional skills, philosophies and values, and other forms of soft power that have been harnessed by states and various publics in both the homelands and hostlands.

**Recasting the Diaspora**

The last set of comments suggest the analytical possibilities of recasting the study of the diaspora through international relations perspectives. The study of international phenomena and processes encompasses a variety of approaches. Conventional approaches include realism, liberalism, and Marxism and their iterations, neo-realism, neo-liberalism, and neo-Marxism, while the relatively newer ones include critical theory, post-modernism, constructivism, feminism, and ecocentricism.
Realism focuses on states as rational actors protecting their interests in a competitive and anarchic global system. Liberalism embraces the power of human reason and progress, the plurality of state actors and multidimensionality of state actions, and the role of institutions and international organizations in mitigating anarchy and conflicts. The question that arises from the two perspectives is the extent diasporas operate as political actors, from city mayors to members of Congress or parliament and cabinet to prime ministers as in the Caribbean and the presidency as with the Obama administration. More broadly, is the influence diaspora citizens, activists and their supporters on the continent exert on state actors and international organizations, including the United Nations, the African Union, and the Regional Economic Communities, and the distribution of capabilities that shape outcomes at national, regional, and global levels.

Marxist ideas on capitalism and imperialism, which stress the primacy of economic and material forces—historical materialism—in international relations focus on the interplay of states and markets, power and production, and the states-system and world capitalist economy. They stress global inequalities arising out of the internationalization of relations of production, how the developed capitalist countries exercise hegemonic power on the world order to maintain material inequalities through coercion and consent.

For diaspora studies, several important questions arise including the ways in which transnational capitalist development produces and reproduces diasporas, how the latter mediate its global hegemony and its associated inequalities of power, resources, and opportunities, as well as the resistances it engenders. Such an approach forces us to ponder critically the export of diaspora political, social, cultural, and economic capitals instead of complacently celebrating it.

Critical theory, which borrowed insights from Marxist ideas and other traditions in seeking to explain how the existing global order came about, changes, and can be changed. Initially focused on individual societies, international critical theory extends the focus from the domestic realm to the global realm. It stresses the connection between knowledge and interests, that theories of international engagements are conditioned, like any form of knowledge, by history and social, cultural, and ideological contexts so they are not objective or neutral.

Postmodernism incorporates elements of critical thought in its analysis of power and knowledge, that the production of knowledge is a normative and political process, and operations of power fit within existing structures and discourses. It sees many of the problems studied in international relations also as matters of power and authority, of struggles to impose authoritative interpretations. This calls for deconstruction and double reading of how any totality, whether a text, theory, discourse, or structure is constituted and deconstituted.

For diaspora studies critical theory and postmodernism help in advancing reflexive theorizing, critiquing dominant conceptualizations of the diaspora, seeing diaspora communities as socially and historically determined, and exploring the avenues and trajectories of change and emancipation from existing constraints. Post-modernism helps us understand how boundaries between home and abroad are constructed, spatialized political identities developed, how violence, boundaries and identity reinforce each other in the construction of contemporary states, and how the latter are naturalized and normalized as a mode of national and international subjectivity.

As for constructivism, while it derives its roots from critical international theory, it developed after the end of the Cold War to explain world politics, which the neo-realists and neo-liberals had failed to predict, and the critical theorists could not adequately explain. Constructivists contend material and ideational or normative structures shape the identities, behavior, and actions of social and political actors whether states or individuals through the mechanisms of imagination, communication, and constraint. They stress that agents and structures are mutually constituted.
While some constructivists focus on the domestic or international, holistic constructivists bridge the two domains and focus on the mutually constitutive relationship between the international social and political order and global change.

This approach can help advance diaspora studies by exploring the mutual constitution of agents and structure in diaspora communities, the interlocking nature of the domestic and international domains, and the international social, economic, and political order and national and global change.

Feminist perspectives gained currency from the 1980s. They stress the importance of gender relations as an analytic category in studies of all domains of social, economic, political, and cultural life, as well as foreign policy, security, power, and the global political economy. Empirically, feminists have produced voluminous scholarship recording women’s experiences, restoring the exclusions, and reading the silences in conventional malestream scholarship, including studies on women in international development, gender and development, the gendered dynamics of globalization, international division of labor, the gendered construction of international organizations, non-state actors in global politics, and transnational women’s networks.

Analytically, feminism focuses on deconstructing the gender biases that pervades core concepts in the disciplines, many interdisciplinary fields, and international relations that prevent comprehensive understanding. They critique the separation of private and public spheres, domestic and international politics, see the state and international institutions as architects of gendered power, and posit an empowering model of agency as connected, interdependent, and interrelated. Normative feminism offers a feminist agenda for global change. They problematize the dominant dichotomies and hierarchies in global relations that replicate the male-gender dichotomy. Within feminism there have been debates between white feminists and feminists of color, and feminists in the global North and from the global South, which challenges global feminist solidarity.

Diaspora studies stand to gain enormously from feminist theoretical and methodological interventions, reconstructions, and insights in exposing the experiences of women, exploring the gendered dynamics and dimensions of diaspora phenomena, processes practices, policies, programs, and paradigms, as well as the need to produce gender disaggregated data.

Finally, there is what is variously called ecocentrism, environmentalism or green theory that emerged out environmental politics and movements and recast how we study and analyze humanity and nature, history and geography, society and ecosystems, and economic growth, development, and sustainability. This body of thought provides a holistic view about the interconnectedness of all ecological relationships including the human and non-human worlds, current and future generations, the need for the ethical and sustainable use of resources because economic growth and development is often anti-ecological and there are limits to growth of human societies in a finite ecosystem.

Ecologists offer a sharp and distinctive critique of the prevailing state and international system and propose a restructuring of the global order. They advocate decentralization of political, economic, and social organization as evident in the phrase, “think globally, act locally.” They propose “reclaiming the commons” and global environmental governance that doesn’t depend entirely on sovereign states. They seek to integrate facts and values, normative and explanatory concerns, focus on concentration of power and homogenizing forces, political economy and global inequalities, and embrace the emancipatory possibilities of theory and an ecocentric ethic.

What can diaspora studies benefit from these perspectives? It would entail critically examining diaspora environmental ideas, interventions, and movements, the environmental impact of diaspora economic, political, and social contributions and engagements with the continent, and their advocacy in domestic and international forums on issues of climate change and mitigation, one of the
most important agendas of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals upon which the future of humanity, nature, and our fragile planet rest. A recent study covering 22 African countries suggests “diaspora income has a negative and statistical impact on ecological footprint.”

**Conclusion**

I have tried to suggest the analytical possibilities of recasting African diaspora studies through intentional, interdisciplinary, and systematic engagement with conventional and more recently developed theoretical and methodological paradigms in international relations, the need to critically engage and integrate epistemological, ontological, and ethical insights from diverse disciplines and modes of thought. The historical processes and realities of diasporas as social formations, embedded as they are in globalized and racialized capitalism, world system, global order, international division of labor—take your pick—is too complex and contradictory for exclusive claims to truth by any one discipline or perspective.

We need to candidly interrogate relations between the diaspora and the continent and among the diaspora along the enduring inscriptions of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, sexuality, and other social markers including colorism. In a paper I wrote years ago on intra-diasporas relations in the United States among the four waves of diasporas—the historic communities of African Americans, migrant communities from other diasporic locations such as the Caribbean and South America, recent immigrants from the indigenous communities of Africa, and African migrants who are themselves diasporas from Asia or Europe—I placed their relations along a continuum of antagonism, ambivalence, acceptance, adaptation, and assimilation. In my global diaspora project I have found this schema broadly applicable to other regions with some modifications.

The challenges are evident even in relations between academics from the new diaspora and their counterparts on the continent. In my report presented to CCNY in February 2013 on “Engagements between African Diaspora Academics in the U.S. and Canada and African Institutions of Higher Education,” I identified five sets of obstacles: first, lack or inadequate administrative and financial support on both sides; second, rank and gender imbalances in accessing resources and opportunities for internationalization; third, attitudinal problems and stereotypes on both sides; fourth, hurdles arising from differences in academic systems; and finally, questions of citizenship and patterns of diasporization. These challenges persist and have been substantiated more recently in a report also funded by CCNY on *African Academic Diaspora Toolkit*.

I would like to end with an observation and some questions. In discourses and conferences on African diasporas the discussion is often about what the diaspora can do for the motherland. What can and does the continent do for the diaspora? For example, in shoring diaspora struggles for civil rights and against white supremacy, and diaspora demands for reparations so forcefully articulated by historian Hilary Beckles, my former colleague at the University of the West Indies and its current vice chancellor. How can there be a true mutuality of support and engagement that empowers and transforms both Africa and its diasporas.

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