Africa through a Diaspora Lens

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A personal anecdote about how not to interpret people's identities from their looks helps frame my remarks on Africa and diaspora studies. The embarrassment occurred in a grocery store in Cambridge, UK run by an Indian family. While picking up groceries once I fell to chatting heartily with the old Indian man, the founder and owner of the shop that at other times was run by two of his sons. We shared mutual tales of how cold and different the UK was from back "home". We both missed the social warmth of our respective homelands. Suddenly, I piped up and asked him: 'So how often do you go back home to India?' His answer, clearly with some measure of bafflement: 'I have never been there before. I come from Kenya'. Me, in embarrassed confusion: 'Oh!'

The study of Africa within African Studies and in Diaspora Studies have traditionally been taken to be distinctive fields. However, the subject called "Africa" takes on quite a different inflection when considered from both perspectives simultaneously. As a rule when people speak of the African diaspora they refer predominantly to the former slave diasporas in North America, Brazil and the Caribbean. In this view the African diaspora is one of the classic diasporas and is comparable to that of the Jewish, the Greek, and the Armenian traditions. If we switch the terms slightly, however, and instead focus on migratory and diasporic patterns from and within the continent itself, different realities come into focus. Studies of diaspora within Africa then take account of the many confluences and trajectories of non-African peoples that for various reasons have found themselves on the continent, and also on Africans that have found themselves elsewhere. In the first category we might include the considerable South Asian diaspora in East Africa, the Lebanese diaspora of West Africa, and the Italian diaspora of South Africa among others.

East Africa provides an interesting case for considering the many complications that come to the foreground when we consider matters through a diaspora studies lens. South Indians, mainly from India, were first brought to East Africa as indentured labour from about the 1890s. The indentured labor policy was itself designed as a response to the abolition of slavery in the 1840s to take account of the needs of plantation owners who now felt their plantations were sure to collapse due to the loss of slave labour. When the policy was extended to East Africa it was mainly to provide non-African labor for building the East African railway line that the British administration wished to develop. One feature of these Indians in East Africa was that most of them were skilled labor, being mainly technicians, blacksmiths, woodworkers, etc. They were specifically targeted for their skills. After the termination of the indentured labor policy in the 1920s some of them decided to remain in the region. Being mostly male, they were encouraged to marry and bring their wives over from India. By the 1960s, and after the independence of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, the Indians had not only become a central part of the civil service administration but also considered themselves African. An effect of this was that by the 1960s the myth of return, long taken as a defining feature of diasporas, had been progressively abandoned by the East African Indians. Having come from largely rural areas in India they were also now heavily urbanized and used to negotiating with urban institutions.

The policy of Africanization that was instituted in East Africa following Independence was to trigger a new process of diasporization for these Indians. Africanization meant a form of affirmative action to rectify racial anomalies within the government sector that had been prevalent during the rule of the British administration. But the effects of the policy proved to be deleterious for the Indian community. They were forced to take early retirement or in several cases were relieved of their jobs. And in Uganda, Idi Amin was to trigger a mass migration of South Indians from Uganda and the rest of the region. The Africanization of the civil service in East Africa and the violent policies of Idi Amin generated the process of what Parminder Bhachu has called the twice migrant phenomenon. For many of

these Indians now had to migrate again, moving to the UK, Canada, and the United States. Because of their highly urbanized and technocratic and administrative skills, these migrants were very different from Indians who had originally migrated to the Western countries directly from India itself. In the UK it did not take long for the East African Indians to enter into the higher levels of the civil service and businesses; most of them bought their own homes shortly after arrival in the UK, again distinguishing them sharply from direct migrants from India. What was most important is that because of the gradual process of shedding the myth of return (since they had no inclination to go back to India and could not return to East Africa) they consolidated their families firmly within the new societies in the West they had settled into. Furthermore, unlike migrants coming directly from India, the East African Indians were often able to move with an entire three-generation set of a family with them to their new homes, thus allowing them to rapidly replicate the community networks in their new locations that had been firmly evolved within their East African societies since the 1890s.

What we see then is that there are fertile intersections between African Studies and Diaspora Studies. There are certain questions that this brief account of the East African Indian diaspora brings to the foreground. The first is how much they allow us to see the complexity in the diaspora phenomenon. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the East African Indians could be described as a labor diaspora, and thus similar to the Indians who found themselves in Guyana and other places. But by the 1930s and 40s and after two generations of settlement they had become a vibrant trade and administrative diaspora. The concept of trade diaspora also allows us to bring into view the long trading relations that Gujarati Indians had had with the East African coast from at least the 14th century onwards. However, following the process of Africanization and Idi Amin's brutal policies, the East African Indians were very much a victim diaspora, thus comparable to the Jewish, Armenian, and African American traditions we noted earlier. Thus, by the 1970s the East African Indians represented a telescoped form of the various phases diasporization. In their particular case the early migrants were male and had a strong focus on the homeland of India. The next phase was that of family re-unification from the 1920s and 30s, and the third was the consolidation of community ties within the new location. In a way by the time the East African Indians became re-diasporized from the 1970s they had reached the tail end of the multi-phased diasporization process. Thus when they migrated they had a more secure consciousness of their identity and social networks and were able to reproduce these relatively rapidly within their new Western locations.

The question remains: are these East African Indians Africans or Indians? Crucial in answering this question is the character of marriage patterns among this community. It has been noted that they tended to practice what might be called caste endogamy, so that despite the long sojourn in Africa they still retain the symbols of Indianness. And yet, as is suggested in the anecdote with which I opened these reflections, when asked where they come from they routinely respond that they come from Africa and not India. But the other question that these twice diasporized people pose is even more significant, namely, who is really an African? To some people this has a straightforward answer, but as soon as you begin to think about Africa through a lens of diaspora it is no longer a simple matter. The case of the Indians of East Africa provides fascinating entry points for discussing the nature of African Studies (who qualifies to be called African and how did they get to be so) as well as wider debates about categories in Diaspora Studies in general (different types of diasporization and their intersections and overlaps over time). Furthermore, from a multi-lateral perspective drawing on diaspora studies we are able to pose fresh questions regarding the processes that take place in the exclusively "African" population. Are there lessons to be drawn from diaspora studies for understanding the large movements of Nigerians and Ghanaians between their two countries over a period of at least the past 40yrs? How about the Hutu refugees who have been in Tanzania since the late 1960s? And what of the increasing numbers of Africans from all parts of the continent seeking their welfare in post-apartheid South Africa? What does "Africa" mean to all these people?

Even though we cannot dismiss the nation as a unit of analysis of identity, it is evident that posing the question of identity in the world today cannot be done exclusively through a nationalist lens. The sooner we take seriously the significance of the constitutive mixing of peoples, the sooner we will be able to come to a better sense of what *work* identities perform in the world today. As the Gikuyu of Kenya put it: 'He who waits to see the whole animal ends up spearing the tail'.

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Ato Quayson *is Professor of English and Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto.*