

## Book Review

*The New African Diaspora*. Okpewho, I., & Nzegwu, N. (Eds.). (2009). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 544 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-22095-0.

*The New African Diaspora*, edited by Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu, is the follow up to *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* which focused on the African diaspora forcefully relocated to the Americas and Caribbean through enslavement<sup>1</sup>. This volume examines Africans who have migrated in the post World War II period and with the onset of the so-called “decolonization” period in Africa in the 1950s. *The New African Diaspora* explores the experiences of the diaspora as a result of neoliberal globalization; the authors utilise human capital theory and neoliberalism to elucidate on the experiences of the African diaspora, often resulting in questions and contradictions regarding the validity of their claims.

This volume is divided into five sections. Sections two to five follow a similar trajectory as that of a migrant – leaving their home country, having to relocate and negotiate questions of identity and ultimately finding success in the host nations. The majority of the articles outline the experiences of the diaspora in the United States; one article details the experiences of Africans in Canada and a second in Great Britain. This is important as due to the varying histories of Africans in these three nations, readers cannot assume that the experiences of the diaspora in one would represent the experiences of Africans living in another.

The migration of Africans is described by Okpewho as “voluntary movements and relocations of Africans and peoples of African descent between the home continent and various parts of the Western Atlantic” (p. ix). While the migrants discussed in this book have not been enslaved and forced to move as was the case during the slave trade, it is integral to consider whether the movement of millions of Africans away from their homes is in fact voluntary. Under what circumstances would these migrants stay in their home nations? Veney contends that “migration to the US, UK, and Canada has become the principal means of achieving social mobility, pursuing cultural goals in the form of higher education, finding gainful employment, and sending remittances home to support family members left behind” (p. 218). The authors do not consider why Africans need to leave Africa in order to find gainful employment or to provide support for families and whether migration on economic grounds is in fact “voluntary”.

The articles highlight the experiences of African immigrants in the United States, detailing the adaptations of African immigrants to their new homes as well as the challenges faced by the African diaspora. Also evident are the negotiations made by African migrants in keeping their African cultural heritage and the cultural and psychological changes which occur as a result of living in a new environment. The value of the African diaspora is predominantly measured through contributions in art, literature and film. The overarching viewpoint held by many of the contributors is that Africans are capable of being knowledge constructors and valuable members of society, and through hard work African migrants can emerge from the margins of society in the global North and have successful lives.

The onus for success is placed in the hands of the individual. This viewpoint which stems from human capital theory is prevalent in many of the articles and ignores the institutional and

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<sup>1</sup> Would this group even consider themselves to be diaspora? After all, the British who first landed on Plymouth Rock in 1600s are no longer referred to as a British or European diaspora.

structural racism inherent in the system which prejudices against those not part of the majority culture. The inherent racism evident in American society is addressed only when discussing the Haitian “Boat People”, the vast majority of whom enter the US as refugees and low-skilled labourers and when discussing the impressions of the diaspora to the American justice system. In contrast to most research regarding skilled workers from Africa, Okpewho states that “because of their excellent qualifications, many skilled Africans – and African-descended peoples, ... who have relocated to the US in the last few decades have had little trouble settling into good positions and securing permanent residence statuses” (p. 9). This statement decries the need for research which takes into account the heterogeneity of the African diaspora and, thus, “allows for the examination of how different African groups do in their new country” (Takyi, p. 239). Takyi is one author who recognizes that the African diaspora is homogenous and a true understanding of the experiences of African migrants requires research which considers their heterogeneity as an important factor; however, Takyi is referring to regional differences due the countries of origin, thereby ignoring class disparities.

Zezeza argues that “African diasporas are crucial, indeed indispensable, for Africa’s globalization and the Africanization of globalization” (p. 53). In contrast, Burns shows that images of Africa are one-dimensional, playing into stereotypes as “popular culture about Africa always features scenes of starvation, nakedness, and war” (p. 142). Can this continuing stereotypical image of Africa lead to the authentic Africanization of globalization portrayed by Zezeza? Kaba contends that since the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Africans have emigrated in the quest for better paying jobs, “leaving the continent without the adequate human resources needed for any real chance of economic development” (p. 109). Kaba’s contention is a stark contrast from that offered by Zezeza.

Skilled workers who leave Africa are usually trained in professions in which many believe they can find employment in their host nations. That is often not the case. Furthermore, many Africans have been trained or employed in jobs where there may be high unemployment in their home countries or in which their earnings are below what they would like or need; this is often seen as a validation of the economic problems prevalent in African nations. Very seldom, is it asked whether high unemployment in certain fields may be due to a society which does not need people trained in such careers. Is it possible that those who are training to become accountants, lawyers and managers are not being educated with the knowledge needed by different African societies but instead the knowledge deemed important by modernization? Interestingly, no article questioned the reason for high unemployment among skilled workers, simply noting the existence of high unemployment as a factor in migration. The emphasis regarding the brain drain out of Africa is based on the economic fallout for Africa. There is no consideration that when the knowledge which is valued in African societies is not African, this knowledge cannot really help Africa.

According to Fournon, remittances back to families are the largest and most reliable source of income for the global South; in 2005, 167 billion dollars were remitted back (p. 90). Jones argues that “African governments need to create a transparent investment climate. It is only through this process that remittance and investment will greatly impact economic development of the area” (p. 75). The authors do not question the need for remittances, viewing them as necessary for the continuing development of the global South. This neoliberal approach to development suggests that Africans should be encouraged to move away from their homes and families in order to contribute to economic development. Kaba insinuates that migration results in a lack of the adequate human resources needed for any real chance of economic development

(p. 109), thereby ignoring the historical context of many of Africa's problems. Furthermore, when discussing the lack of development in Africa, no mention is made that Africa continues to pay billions more in debt repayment and interest than is received. Would this not affect the development of Africa and "decision" of many to migrate?

This book portrays an image of Africa in which every African is waiting for the opportunity to leave Africa to move to the West. There are undoubtedly many who would love the "opportunity" to move to the global North; however, there are many who would never consider leaving. It is somewhat polemical to depict Africa as a continent with no redeeming features.

Reading this book was similar to attending a multiculturalism festival where one could visit the Kenyan, Ethiopian, Ghanaian and Nigerian pavilions, eat their national foods, listen to traditional music, or buy traditional art, jewellery or clothing – all extremely superficial expressions of a culture and society. These festivals, while entertaining, do not showcase the distinctiveness, beauty or intelligence of Africa, nor illustrate the depth of knowledge held by Africans or the loss to host nations which do not take advantage of this knowledge. It is for these reasons that I found *The New African Diaspora* to be disappointing.

This edition examines the experiences of new migrants as separate from those whose ancestors arrived in the Americas as slaves, an endeavour which is important in gaining a better understanding of the experiences of the new diaspora; however, the articles tend to suggest that all migrants share similar experiences, regardless of class or other differences and that success in the host country is possible through perseverance, thus negating the deep structural inequalities which ensure continued prejudice against African migrants. While it is important to discuss and detail the tremendous gains made by the African diaspora with regards to knowledge construction – in art, literature and film (in this book) – we cannot gloss over the continuing issues and challenges they face when navigating a world in which cultural imperialism is very much a reality.

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