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Voices from the deep

By Edem Djokotoe on Friday 26 February 2010, 08:30:00 CAT (290 Reads)

If there's one word that keeps cropping up in discourses about Africans abroad, it is "Diaspora".

And listening to World Bank experts use it especially in reference to the Ghanaian economy, you'd think they were talking about a place in the sky from where manna drops to feed the poor and the wretched of the earth. Heaven, in other words.

Of course, if you are the Finance Minister, you are inclined to agree with them. And who would blame you? After all, the figures show that your compatriots living and working abroad contributed no less than US\$6 billion to the national economy in a single financial year at a time when the world was buckling under the weight of a global recession.

Now as a Ghanaian citizen living and working abroad, I should be joining the cheerleaders as they wax lyrical about this animal called The Diaspora. But I am not—and I will tell you why. Personally, I think "Diaspora" is a dirty word. And I've got history on my side to prove it.

Let me start by taking you on an excursion to the Museum of the African Diaspora. Actually, this imposing structure of glass and concrete, which covers about 20,000 square feet of prime real estate, is not in Africa but in San Francisco in sunny California.

But the thousands who visit every year don't go for the architecture. Those of African descent are particularly drawn to the Heritage Centre to learn more about their origins and to listen to "the slave narratives". These are sagas along the lines of Alex Haley's 1976 book *Roots*, which traced his family's genealogy to a small village in Senegambia, following his ancestor, Kunta Kinte's painful journey to the US aboard a slave ship. The slave narratives are meant to add flesh and bones to the interlude of history the curators of the museum and the scholars and sponsors behind it erroneously call The Original African Diaspora.

I say "erroneously" because the Slave Trade was not a Diaspora by any stretch of the imagination. If you don't believe me, trace the origin of the word to establish what it meant then. "Diaspora" is an ancient Greek word which literally meant "a scattering of seeds".

The first documented reference to the word appeared in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible—what we know as the Old Testament. It was used to refer to the "dispersion" of the people of Israel by the Babylonians and by the Romans from their homeland—in line with God's holy ordinance: "Thou shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth". Dispersion, according to the Septuagint, was their punishment for turning to idolatry.

But if Genesis 15 and Deuteronomy 1 are anything to go by, God promised the people of Israel they would eventually return to their homeland in Palestine during their final redemption.

Details of the dimensions of the territory they would reoccupy can be found in Ezekiel Chapter 47, but let me steer clear of the controversy about a Jewish homeland in Palestine because it is not particularly relevant to this discussion.

I made the references to show that contrary to popular discourse, there is a world of difference between the divine plan behind the dispersion of the people of Israel and the violent and forcible removal of about 12 million Africans from their homeland and their shipment as slaves to America, Brazil and the Caribbean.

And that is part of the reason why I maintain that Diaspora is a dirty word. Of course, when you look in a standard English dictionary, you won't find a four-letter word, but sanitised definitions of the concept: "any movement of a population sharing a common nationality and/or ethnicity." Either that or Diaspora comes across as "a permanently displaced and relocated collective".

Now as a Ghanaian citizen who lives and works in Zambia, I do not see myself as "permanently displaced" or part of a "relocated collective". Like many other people who live and work outside their countries of origin, I travel back home regularly, maintain strong ties with family and friends there and keep abreast of the happenings thereabouts.

In short, I don't exist in some anonymous void called "The Diaspora"—I live in a country with its own geopolitical reality and its own peoples. And there are people like me of every shade and hue living and working in countries other than their own who simply adjust to the wavelength of their environment and get on with their lives.

Unlike me, there are many out there who do not feel slighted by the reference that they are "in the Diaspora". A friend of mine thinks I am being too prickly about it, making a big deal out of something trivial and unimportant. Perhaps if I explained my point of view, you would understand why I don't think the issue is trivial and unimportant.

Africans and Asian who live in the so-called Diaspora somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere are basically economic refugees—or so is the dominant view. However, for some reason, people of English descent who live abroad are "settlers" or "expatriates". Unlike you and me, they don't inhabit that purgatory called "The Diaspora".

I have never heard the descendants of the English convicts who were shipped to Australia at the turn of the 18th century being referred to in historical records and contemporary discourses as "The English Diaspora". Same goes for the British Pilgrims who fled religious persecution in England

in1620 to settle in modern-day Massachusetts, USA. Why should the meaning of words change depending on who they are used to describe? That is my question.

While we search for answers, let me draw your attention to a handful of Zambians who are making their mark in “The Diaspora”.

James Mwape, his wife Ruth and a friend of theirs called Rabson Lungu have a radio programme they run from their base in the US called Diaspora Voice Talk Show. It comes on air every Saturday from 8 a.m. to 12 noon Eastern Standard Time or 1500 to 1900 hours Zambian time. Those interested in catching the programme can pick it online on <http://www.blogtalkradio/brain-drain> or call in on +1-718-766-4857.

The Diaspora Voice Talk Show is broken into two segments of two hours each and has been running since 2008, attracting no less than 20,000 listeners ever Saturday. How did it start? I asked Mwape, the brains behind it, and he said: “The idea for the programme came during a telephone conversation with a Zambian based in the UK called Dixie Pwele who was working in Shanghai, China at the time. Earlier, my youngest son, Simon, had started a website for the family on www.mwape.com when he was only six years old. I simply added success stories of highly-qualified Zambian-born professional living and working outside the country. The pages became an instant hit with Zambian government officials contacting us, prompting Dixie to ask if we could add a live interactive discussion forum.”

Theirs is not a radio station in the conventional sense of the word, like you’ve have, say Radio Phoenix or Hot FM. Actually, they use blogtalkradio technology as a link for “the Diaspora” to connect with Zambia. In simple terms, the system works like a telephone conference, with the blogtalkradio providing the bridge, switchboard and online live streaming in real time—with the hosts controlling the switchboard and connecting guests to the show.

Mwape tells me that the motivation behind the programme was that Zambians abroad wanted to maintain their indigenous traditions and cultures so that in spite of the distances away from home, they would not lose their identity. “Since we created the weekly series ‘Cultural Warrior, our phone lines have been jammed with callers from all over the place and it is now the most popular of our programmes. We have discovered that actually Zambians at home and abroad have no common forum to openly discuss important cultural issues such as divorce, sex, marriage, development and the role of institutions like Alangizi and Banachimbusa. So this blog radio might just take the place of the traditional insaka and mphala, becoming an important source of live communication between millions of Zambians at home and around the world,” he said.

Another son of the Zambian soil in that great void called “The Diaspora” I want to recognise is Wellington Kanshimike who lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I have never met him but I

was put in touch with him by the First Secretary for Press and Public Relations at the Zambian Embassy in the US, Ben Kangwa who recently reminded me he was Master of Ceremonies at my wedding in 1987.

Kanshimike, who was born and raised in Mufulira in a family of 11 children, is the author of the book When God Made An Opportunity Cost: The Economy of God's Love which was published in the US last year.

An easy read, the book is Kanshimike's own interpretation of the Bible and how it applies to everyday life. He uses various personal experiences to make a number of statements about the love of God and the choices those who serve Him make on the basis of their faith. Apparently, he draws particular inspiration from the Book of Acts where, in his words, God "used a handful of socially uninfluential men with shallow pockets and empty hands to turn the world upside down..."

For me, the most intriguing experience he recounts is the story of a 20-something white woman who ventured into the Diaspora, coming to Zambia as a missionary. She changed her American name and took on a local one: Chikondi Mbewe.

With the change of name came a change of lifestyle, as Kanshimike explains: "Chikondi made an opportunity cost. She left the comfort of her home and American life...and chose the poor villages, the people who did not matter, people from the remotest part of the world, who no-one bothered about but God."

She spent her time in a remote part of Chipata district living in a simple mud hut with a grass-thatched roof which leaked heavily when it rained heavily. Chikondi ate what the local villagers ate and learnt to cook her own meals on an open fire made from wood she collected herself.

Why did she do it? Why do others like her do what they do? Well, for answers, you might want to get a copy of Kanshimike's book. To find out how to lay hands on it, send him email on dorwel@yahoo.co.uk

From the foregoing, it is clear that indeed the sea of knowledge has no shores. Till next Friday, have a blessed weekend.

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