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# Diaspora and Imagined Nationality

## USA-Africa Dialogue *and* *Cyberframing Nigerian Nationhood*

**Koleade Odutola**

Carolina Academic Press
Durham, North Carolina

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ade-Odutola, Kole.
Diaspora and imagined nationality : USA-Africa Dialogue and cyberframing Nigerian nationhood / Kole Ade Odutola.
p. cm. -- (African world series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-59460-926-8 (alk. paper)
1. Nationalism--Nigeria--Electronic discussion groups. 2. USA Africa Dialogue (Electronic discussion group) 3. Nigerians--Political activity--Foreign countries. 4. Electronic discussion groups--Nigeria. 5. Internet--Political aspects--Nigeria. 6. Internet--Social aspects--Nigeria. I. Title. II. Series: Carolina Academic Press African world series.
DT515.59.A34 2011
320.540966028546--dc22
2011020491

Carolina Academic Press
700 Kent Street
Durham, North Carolina 27701
Telephone (919) 489-7486
Fax (919) 493-5668
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

*This book is dedicated to Nigerians who toil day and night on the various websites and home pages.*

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# Series Editor's Preface

The *Carolina Academic Press African World Series*, inaugurated in 2010, offers significant new works in the field of African and Black World studies. The series provides scholarly and educational texts that can serve both as reference works and as readers in college classes.

Studies in the series are anchored in the existing humanistic and the social scientific traditions. Their goal, however, is the identification and elaboration of the strategic place of Africa and its Diaspora in a shifting global world. More specifically, the studies will address gaps and larger needs in the developing scholarship on Africa and the Black World.

The series intends to fill gaps in areas such as African politics, history, law, religion, culture, sociology, literature, philosophy, visual arts, art history, geography, language, health, and social welfare. Given the complex nature of Africa and its Diaspora, and the constantly shifting perspectives prompted by globalization, the series also meets a vital need for scholarship connecting knowledge with events and practices. Reflecting the fact that life in Africa continues to change, especially in the political arena, the series explores issues emanating from racial and ethnic identities, particularly those connected with the ongoing mobilization of ethnic minorities for inclusion and representation.

Toyin Falola
University of Texas at Austin

# Preface

The text is home to thoughts
and its context the rudder
steering readers from flaws.
The text is voice inscribed in cold print,
readers with mental tools can decode
signs, symbols, & codes within.
Texts respond to texts, linking
writers with a past not seen.
The inter-text, hidden between the lines
only the alert can bring to life.

The Internet is fast becoming an extension of life. The virtual nature of the spaces inhabited by individuals addressing multitudes without the slightest knowledge of who is receiving the information and how, has changed the way human beings connect with and stay in touch with each other. The communication universe is constantly transforming itself through the agency of owners, designers, and users. Apart from politics, pornography, and religious institutions, academia has been a major beneficiary of instant communication and wide dispersal of knowledge(s). A scholar like John Berger posits that in certain instances subjectivity is treated as private. In online forums "there is space for the social function of subjectivity" (Berger, 2002, pg. 55). This is in contrast to the highly touted concept of objectivity purportedly practiced in mainstream media. An acceptance of subjectivity as the norm online is to be expected, since identities are in constant flux. According to Erik Chia-Yi Lee, "Identity becomes infinitely plastic in a play of images that knows no end. Consistency is no longer a virtue but becomes a vice; integration is limitation" (1996, INET Proceedings). In effect, those who express their views in online forums are not particularly held to high standards of objectivity but to moral standards of honesty and clarity.

A noticeable observation of online forums is that a new generation of knowledge producers, commentators, and critics is experiencing multiple transitions. The most talked about in the literature of the subject is the transition from

one geographical location to another or the constant migration of intellectuals from developing countries to Western industrialized capitals. Those who left their various "homes" under different conditions later created home pages on the Internet for purposes of communicating, debating, and at times facilitating social change in their countries of origin. The transition from street activism to computer activism has not received as much attention as it should from researchers. The position of Kevin Hill and John Hughes should not be discounted. They observed that "if computers change the way people communicate, they will also inevitably change how people engage in political dialogue" (1997, pg. 3). This book is not just about the emergence of a transformed usage of computers in political dialogue but goes on to look at one of the intellectual products of dialogue. One of the objectives of *Diaspora and Imagined Nationality:* USA-Africa Dialogue *and Cyberframing Nigerian Nationhood* is to bring together the multiple transitions by attending to one of the fruits of this technology-driven mode of communication and knowledge production. This book does not pretend to be universal; it instead focuses on what a small group of intellectuals of African descent and their friends talk about, gripe about, and try to grapple with.

To understand (at least partly) the internal dynamics of online discussion groups as sites for social enquiry or scholastic curiosity, it is imperative to first imagine a community where faces are unknown, just as spaces of interaction are not saloons or conference halls but screens interconnected by invisible wires and cords floating in ether. The individuals who provide the substrate for studies and analyses are known sometimes by their names, affiliations, or writing styles. In this community, there are no streets and institutions where a researcher can visit in the process of gathering information and constructing notions about the people and their lifestyles. Instead of a narrow tunnel view of what is happening, Margaret Mackey suggests that a "thick description of reading attends to the contributing roles of reader, text … and a context [which] includes not just the immediate interpretive situation but also broader social, cultural, commercial, and technological consideration" (2003, pp. 405). In effect postings submitted for moderation online take the place of physical activities, while physical violence is replaced by violence in text. In essence, the traditional ethnographic techniques are supplanted by virtual ethnography made popular by scholars like Christine Hine (2000) and Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000). In this kind of research, texts written and read are both means to various ends and ends in themselves. Instead of words spoken by people and the various nonverbal cues that surround such interactions, virtual ethnography observes texts against the background of the context of production and at times the inter-text built into the narrations.

Once your process of imagination is in place you are welcome to the virtual community which I participated in, and studied for a number of years. As you may know, a virtual community is in stark contrast to offline communities only in regards to known faces and the nature of trust developed over time with "informants" who help researchers in navigating the terrain. In this case, the virtual terrain is technology-defined in an unobtrusive way. There are scholars who argue that there are not many differences between online and offline communities. Leighton Evans argues that "online communities have become a fundamental, rather than exceptional, part of user's experiences and lives, and that differentiating in this manner is mistaken" (2010).

In most academic or polemical activities, a combination of profit and pleasure can be found at the root of the activities. The initial cost of setting up physical forums for intellectual discourse determines the quality of participants and the duration of the event. However, in most online forums, where the capital outlay is almost zero, pleasure and not profit appears to be the driving force for participation by the main moderator/founder and others who take time to contribute or initiate discussions. The pleasure derived can be converted into social capital at a later date. In addition, the pleasure/gratification goes beyond postings made by the participants since there is evidence to show that certain issues at hand demanded offline actions and financial contributions. Samples of some actions taken by participants are available but are not the focus of this book.

This book focuses around the online information exchange forum founded seven years ago by Toyin Falola, a Professor of History at University of Texas. To casual observers this forum is just another virtual site where scholars, activists and artists meet to specifically deliberate on media-related happenings on the African continent as a whole and in the world in general. On the contrary, the forum is fast becoming a testing ground for ideas and a resource for teachers and policy makers in search of further clarifications on complex issues and themes. It is a virtual space, which, in opposition to Neil Postman, has been inducing "the capacity to think" (1985, pg. vii). It is essential to point out that a new media now makes up for the gap in previous mass media forms. Critics point out the structural deficiency in television programs, especially their insistence on entertainment and lack of capacity to carry out critical thinking. In the case of the old newspapers it was common to edit or reject a reader's feedback. Observations of online forums show that contributions made do not only add to news stories, they sometimes rewrite products of "lazy journalism" (Morrow, 2001). There is data to show that *USA-Africa Dialogue* is an active site; Anthony Agbali notes that the intention of the moderator of the site was "to construct a dialogic arena using the Internet and computer technologies to

mediate and facilitate cogent discourses pertaining to American and African interests" (2010, pg. 451). The arena created has produced both spectacle in the form of flowery writings and spectacular instances in the form of hot exchanges that have been documented. Unlike the products of the dialogue, which have received wide-ranging attention, neither the thought process nor condition of production or even of its creation have received much attention for reasons linked to how virtual communities operate and are constituted.

The origin of the site is invested with a stamp of an organic farming-like concept in opposition to man-made farming interventions. The metaphor of an organic farm allows nature and natural forces to play the role of fertilizers as opposed to externally induced artificial growth stimulants. In *USA-Africa Dialogue* there is no "unseen hand of God" controlling and dictating the issues for discussion. Real life situations, as they are reported or witnessed, dictate what is on offer from time to time. This variety of constant reflection and intellection goes beyond citizen journalism. The rational interventions (sometimes very passionate) appear to be a cross between academic treatise and letter to the editor. The forum to a great extent has provided a space for academics in the diaspora to constantly voice their opinions to a wider audience and at the same time receive feedback on emerging ideas. According to Falola, the service provided by *USA-Africa Dialogue* "has enabled the African voice to be heard, for alternative ideas to spread, for debates to be centered on our concerns, for Africans in Africa to present their positions to the world, and for those in the diaspora to communicate their views to their colleagues in Africa" (2010, pg. 142).

When the views of Agbali and Falola are taken together, a picture of a virtual communicative space begins to develop but does not speak to the constitutive nature of the interactions, especially in the manner in which themes are introduced and how they develop. Even if an observer does not realize the nonlinearity of the debates as conditioned by differences in time and space, an observer who stays long enough will quickly notice the nonsequential order of the postings and the lack of closure of debates. The non-closure of discussions is not unusual and goes to show the open-endedness of the forum. The functions of the moderator are "backstage" and hardly visible online. One function is certain and known to every participant: the function of approving postings and new members. There have been a few instances when the moderator had to caution those who breached the established code of interaction and decorum. Over a period of time, those who engage in discussions develop some sort of camaraderie that allows for communication to continually take place. As the interactions grow, there are political questions that must be asked about the impact and influence of the materials produced on this site and how

both the process and the outcomes affect individuals at one level and the diaspora community at another level.

There are two other metaphors that capture the nature of *USA-Africa Dialogue*. These metaphors will help readers form a mental picture of how a country and a continent can find space in a crowded virtual world to engage each other in meaningful exchange of ideas and reproduction of knowledge. One of the metaphors alludes to *USA-Africa Dialogue* as one of the horses of globalization, helping to bring the past to the present and carefully mixing the present with the past in a bid to create hybrid forms. The hybrid forms created depend mainly on archival materials for their production. Discussions and debates will be impossible without quick access to previous threads saved in the archives.

At another level, it is possible to see the forum as a site for the organic farming of ideas. The reasoning behind this second metaphor is to present the self-producing nature of the forum. It is not a forum that has issues dictated to it like a non-organic farmer would spray fertilizer on the farm. Here ideas grow in a natural way without external intervention by a researcher or the moderator of the group. It can be said that virtual ethnographers do not leave traceable footprints in communities they study over a period of time.

In the real world of bricks and mortar, each time a researcher visits a location, the seed planted and harvested from that community represents an abundant helping of hope—hope that the intervention by the research will yield results and changes made will not be reversed. There is an assumption that whichever direction the river of hope flows, life continues for all those who participate in such projects, cerebral or manual. The search for locally produced knowledge about nation, nationalism, and nationality is ongoing and will remain a part of the interest of scholars and politicians in years to come.

One of the contributions of this study to academia is the suggestion of a naturalistic research method in monitoring user preferences of news items. Members of electronic discussion groups, of their own free volition, search for information and news items relevant to perceived needs of the group. The information and news stories then form the basis of conversation, discussion, and sometimes debates. At other times the discussions then yield to well-informed opinion articles that are circulated widely online. At some other times, home-based newspapers publish opinion pieces deemed newsworthy and in line with their editorial policies. The search for meaning of nation, nationhood, nationalism, and nationality remains an endless enterprise of which this book hopes to make a contribution.

## Roadmap of the Study

The procedural order of this study started with a comprehensive background and justification for the research and then related the various concepts to the objective of the study. It now continues with an understanding of the extent to which a geographically dispersed people rely on online reports from their national media and to a lesser extent on reports from other sources. The sources, as anticipated, contribute to the creation of critical conversations/discussions and narratives about physical space, governance, leadership, and normative expectations for an imagined state (or in some cases, nation). A detailed look at selected postings was carried out so as to uncover the level of pre-existing background knowledge included in the posting or contribution. Postings and contributions are read with a view of establishing the extent of opinion/sentiment indicators in them.

The next chapter is an extensive literature review of previous works relating to the subject of this research. The literature review leads to a main research question and a few interrelated questions. Once the research question is established, the chapter that follows undertakes a philosophical view of the research by stating the methodology and the subsequent research methods. The choice of research methods help to formulate the nature of data and their collection. The next two chapters contain the data and analyses. The last chapter discusses the data and draws a conclusion in relation to the guiding questions of the research.

# Acknowledgments

There are so many people I would like to thank for their support and guidance. I would like to thank Professor Toyin Falola, who served as one of my committee members when the dissertation that gave birth to this book was in the process of becoming. I also thank Professor John Pavlik, the chair of my committee, and the two other members: Professors Barbara S. Reed and Hartmut B. Mokros.

My gratitude also goes to my virtual committee members who offered their time and intellectual resources during this dark period of my life. I thank Dr. Chris Vaughan for his interest and constant pep talks; I also thank Hilary Robertson-Hickling, Dr. Thiven Reddy, Dr. Emily Noelle Ignacio, Dr. Euichul Jung, Dr. Mercy Ette, Dr. Atreyee Phukan, Mr. Olusesan Ekisola, Dr. Omolola Ijeoma Ogunyemi, Dr. Mojubaolu Okome, Dr. Akintunde Akinyemi, and Dr. Andrew Smith, who introduced me to Ben Moran's work and who made very valuable suggestions that cleared the way for me when I had no idea where to turn.

Apart from intellectual support I also got financial and moral support from so many people whom I cannot mention here. To MD, for all the gifts, I thank you. Van Delaan of Gainesville, I thank you too. Teri, Sally, Gerwine, and all the others whom space prevents me from honoring here by name, I thank you all. I cannot forget the security staff of the University of Florida for their tacit support during the long lonely nights here. My appreciation also goes to Joan Chabrak for her willingness to go the extra mile, with a smile to spare. Additional assistance also came from Diane Bruxvoort.

I thank the Chair of Languages, Literatures, & Cultures, Mary Watt, for approving the production grant that facilitated a part of the production. I also thank Karen Clayton for her painstaking editorial support.

I thank my mother, ModupeOdutola, my sister; Nike, and my brothers, Gbola, Banjo, and Tokunbo for their prayers and hope that the tough period which finally resulted in the production of this book will come to an end.

# Background and Justification of the Study

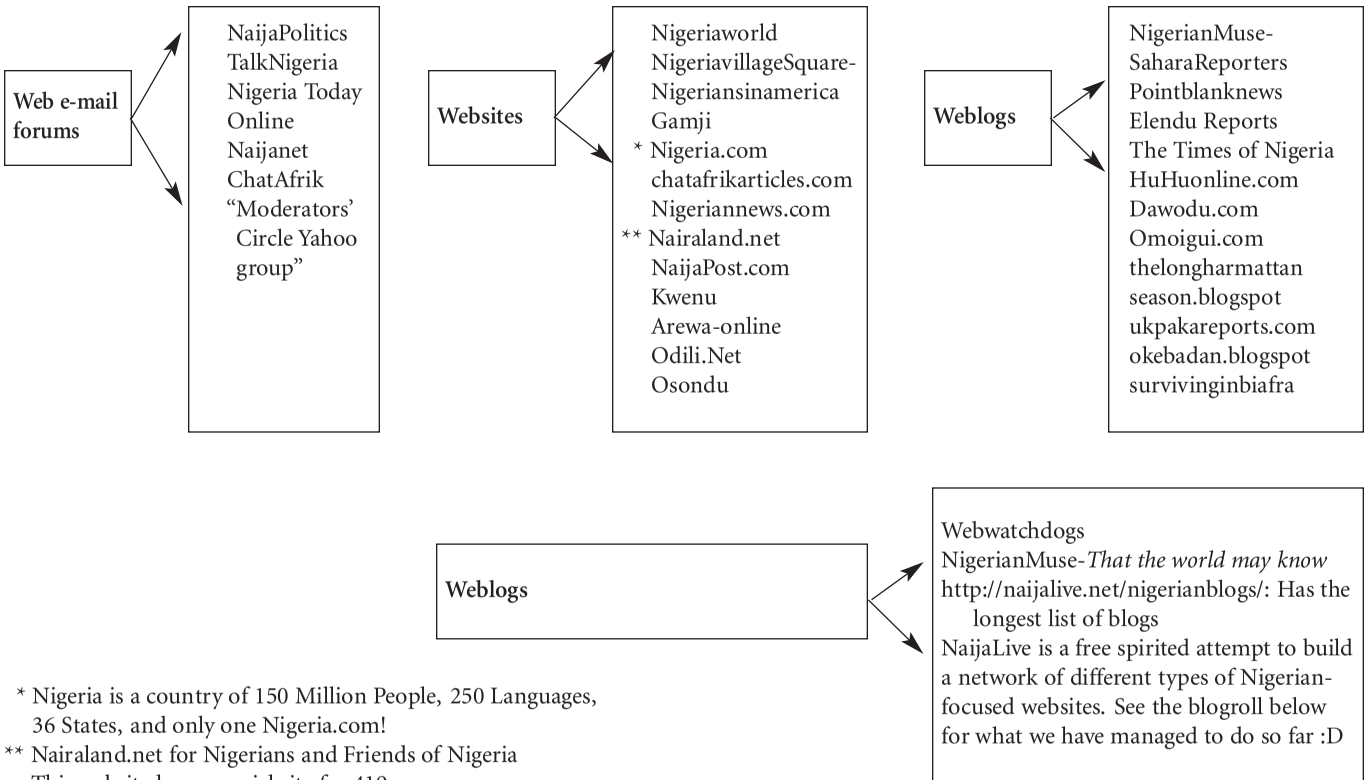
*USA-Africa Dialogue* and other online groups have created possibilities for interactions between scholars of different nations, and are becoming sites of knowledge production and circulation. To fully engage these sites, this study sought out postings generated during 'natural' online interactions among geographically dispersed/diasporic Nigerians, containing ideas (from various intellectual sources) needing further interrogation. A few of the ideas encapsulated within these postings were brought to the fore, discussed, and analyzed. The consequent search for the presence of indigenous knowledge within the postings produced a promise, not a substantial product, that can be circulated within the discipline of new media studies.

The chosen method of analysis subjected online conversations and reflections to close readings aimed at extracting contextual and intertextual meanings. This study also expands on the fundamental question raised by Misty Bastian in relation to how absence of physical constraints (and therefore, of potential violence) is reflected in nationalist discourse. I argue that freedom from physical constraints and potential violence has been replaced by norms and the novelty of virtual spaces, and that the dominance of Western paradigms and epistemological shackles imposed by technology now act as barriers to nationalist cyber-discourse. Textual analysis reveals that Nigerians draw extensively from a broad spectrum of ideas, but most significantly from notions emanating from Europe and America. In addition, Western notions like nationalism, nationhood, and state can hardly be differentiated in the consciousness of some contributors. This study presents traces of the hegemony of Western ideas in postings and conversations online. Nigeria's presence as a postcolonial nation (or nation space) is established online through various activities of citizens at home and in the diaspora. These communicative activities and political activism have led to a wide range of scholarly interrogations and interventions in media, communication, and migration studies against the backdrop of globalization, democratization, and modernization theories.

It has been amply documented that communication and social interaction produce ideas that can be evaluated along the lines of deliberative democracy. These approaches have produced outcomes without the benefit of the complex debates, dialogues, and disagreements that come with popular participation and creation of variegated knowledge by a collective.

I conclude that the concept of nationhood is not fixed but is a symbolic construct that evolves through unstructured conversations, sharing, and intense debates.

## Visual Representation of Nigerian Online Communities




* Nigeria is a country of 150 Million People, 250 Languages, 36 States, and only one Nigeria.com!

** Nairaland.net for Nigerians and Friends of Nigeria
This website has a special site for 419