

# **In Search of African Diasporas**

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# In Search of African Diasporas

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*Testimonies and Encounters*

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS

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Durham, North Carolina

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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



# Foreword: A Scholar in Search of Our Collective Consciousness!

It is hard to be an objective reader when you know an author as well as I know Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. It is even harder to pretend to a sugary non-judgmental objectivity when your friendship and engagement with the author has been marked by struggles with understanding and intervening with the various complex and contradictory manifestations of what Ali Mazrui has described as the “African condition.” The good thing about confessing that this is not an objective foreword, in the sense of the often proclaimed social science demand of objectivity, is that happily this book itself is not an ‘objective’ book, in the sense of pretending or claiming to having no positions, carrying no agenda nor professing forceful arguments.

In fact, what this book has is a lot of strong positions, tremendous passion, the occasionally not-too-well-concealed anger and frustration and an unwavering commitment to the mission of the author, which is to search, encounter, engage, and recognize African diasporas.

As the over 500 pages of the book show, it is an ambitious intellectual and political project, a relatively uncharted and unrecognized terrain of scholarship, action, and interactions. More painfully, it is a terrain that has been intentionally undervalued because of its potential for demystifying universes of domination that thrive on erasure, concealment, denial, and/or obfuscation of the histories of many peoples of African descent who are voluntarily and involuntarily dispersed around the world. This book in its narratives and reflections attempts to strip veils, untangle knots, and shine light on experiences and conditions of the lives of many peoples of African descent. It points at possible implications for our emancipation from material and mental bondage, for laying tracks toward the re-discovery of our collective confidence and consciousness as peoples united by histories and experiences, some with shackles we must shatter and others with opportunities that we must take. The book is analytical, in places combative, filled with insights and stories. It is an unusual genre in African writing—a combination of a researcher’s field notes and a travelogue.

It is a work of exploration around the question of what it means to be African and of African descent. In encountering the African diasporas in their complex expressions of color, racial and ethnic mixtures, religions and faiths, both the author and, hopefully, readers can re-engage our Africanness. For me, this book solidly reaffirms my long held position that there are many ways to be African! To discover this is to exit our intellectual, political, and cultural comfort zones, to encounter our collective selves in all its diversity, complexity and contradictions. It is to weave unendingly the threads of what unites us and consistently offer meanings of our collective claims to united destinies, dignity and humanity in spite of our differences. In the rest of this foreword, I focus on three key

elements that emerge for me from this work. I discuss under three different themes, but they often overlap and are intertwined.

## The Question

The first theme is the question that runs through the work, what I actually see as an important element of the intellectual mission and project here. The question is: what does it mean to be a person of African descent living outside of the African continent? Are there discernible qualities or unique signifiers comparable to the DNA that spontaneously defines such persons, irrespective of location? Or is the meaning situational, a learned condition, socially constructed and reconstructed? If it is more of the latter, what are the factors that most facilitate or enhance the kindling of such individual and social memories and ensure the collectively conscious process of reconstruction and renewal of memories and experiences?

What do such collective consciousness, experiences, and memories mean for politics, cultures, and the building of human conditions of affirmation of self-dignity, advancement of rights, resistance to domination and inequality? What does it mean for the search for a humanity nurtured on the hopes and beliefs of the possibilities of a better world that will transcend the contemporary and historical injustices of slavery, colonization, racism, sexism, illegal trafficking, gender inequality, ethnic cleansing, and genocide?

In this book, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza consistently engages this question in its many variations in his discussions with intellectuals and academics (they are not the same!), his questions to cab drivers and his encounters with peoples of African descent across various social classes. The efforts to answer this question express varying and, at times, contradictory understanding, emotions, and positions. The answers express optimism, cynicism, pains of alienation and exclusion, but also the resilience and stamina for new possibilities, for new ways of seeing, thinking, doing and being that are freed from monolithic, dominant, and exploitative traditions and structures. But one thing is clear—there is no one answer, and Eurocentric perspectives and even epistemologies are unsatisfactory and unfulfilling.

## Diasporic Lives

The thread through the narratives is the exploration of African diasporic lives across many contexts and places. There are stories of the diaspora in the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. As the author takes us through his journeys from 2006 to 2009 to Venezuela, Brazil, Haiti, Mexico, Germany, Britain, France, Cuba, Spain, India, Qatar, Dubai, and Oman, we catch glimpses and encounter different lives and different life stories and histories.

We also inevitably are allowed entry into Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's life over this period. From conferences and lecture halls; museums, libraries, and art galleries; run-down cafés and high-class restaurants; night clubs and malls; train stations and shared train cabins; airports; remote, poor villages; city markets, shanty towns and favelas; five star hotels and tiny Parisian apartments; Zeleza takes us along on his journeys. We see him asking questions,

reading, lecturing, waiting, eating, dancing, being conned out of his money, receiving extraordinary generosity, falling sick, or getting sick of some of the people he meets.

It is indeed a human story, within which are many other stories, such as his love story with Cassandra, his wife; his father-child relations with Mwai, his son, and Natasha, his daughter; his job transitions in those four years; the death of a friend and the celebrations and frustration in the different passages in his life.

## Politics, Rights, and Identities

As I read this book, I realize and become convinced that the African diaspora conditions are principally about rights, justice, politics, and political economies. These are stories of structural exclusion, historical grievances, and contemporary issues of rights, recognition, awareness, and consciousness-raising and identity politics. Of course, there are individual stories here of alienation, imposed shame, and frustration, but there are also collective stories. There are collective stories of erasure, social labeling and stigmatization, collective presence in degraded neighborhoods and settlements, obstacles and denial of access to education and various opportunities of social mobility and transformation. But beyond the stories of neglect, abandonment, prejudice, structural racism, we see strong expressions of individual and collective agencies. We see forms of self-organization and consciousness-raising. We see new forms of memorialization, conscientization and recognition through books, music, dance, and cultural performances. We see political organizing and mobilizing around human rights issues. We are beginning to hear and see voices and presences hitherto hidden, suppressed, marginalized.

In many ways, Zeleza's encounters and narratives here constitute another form of giving voice, recognizing existence and presence to all these hitherto neglected, marginalized, exploited, and denied African diasporas found around the world. I am convinced that this book is only part of a beginning of an awakening—a recognition and valorization of communities and peoples around the world that have been isolated and have often been at the bottom of the heap. This book, and many more interventions and actions to come, will draw attention to the gross human and peoples' rights violations that their contemporary conditions embody as well as the struggles of African diasporas for agency, for belonging, for their humanity.

Tade Akin Aina  
New York, June 4, 2011



# Preface and Acknowledgments

This book owes its existence to many people across numerous countries in the Pan-African world of African diasporas. They welcomed me, shared with me their experiences, insights, struggles, tragedies, triumphs, and aspirations. It started out of curiosity, my immense curiosity about the diasporic histories and conditions of my own immediate family, of many of my friends and colleagues, and about the peoples of African descent scattered around the world. This intellectual yearning was cultivated through my professional historical work, my fascination with popular culture, and my enduring passions for Pan-African struggles and solidarity.

My personal and professional biographies are inscribed by the diaspora condition from the very beginning. I am a product of southern Africa's precolonial, colonial and postcolonial migrations that created multilayered diasporas in and from the region. My mother is descended from the Nguni who spread across southern Africa following the rise of Shaka's Zulu nation in the early 19th century; in Malawi and Zambia they became Ngoni. My Malawian-born parents met and married in Zimbabwe in the mid-1950s where I was born; they were part of the waves of labor migrations spawned by the region's settler colonial capitalisms. I received my primary, secondary and undergraduate education in Malawi before leaving for my master's degree and doctorate in England and Canada, respectively. Like so many young Africans, my sojourn to England and Canada for graduate education was fueled by Africa's postcolonial developmentalist ambitions. Unfortunately, we increasingly remained abroad because of the continent's deepening authoritarianism that frustrated the triple dreams of uhuru for self-determination, development, and democracy.

Looking back, it is clear my diasporic life and my enduring fascination with the diaspora was incubated by my family's multi-ethnic, multi-national, and multi-lingual realities and identities. In 1972, just as I was about to enter college at 17, my family fled President Banda's dictatorship in Malawi back to white-ruled Rhodesia, as Zimbabwe was then known. A dozen years later, they moved to Botswana. I completed my bachelor's degree in 1976 and after a year as a teaching assistant at the University of Malawi I moved to Britain for my MA and Canada for my PhD. After the completion of my studies I held a series of positions at universities in Jamaica (1982–1984), Kenya (1984–1990), Canada (1990–1995), and the United States (since 1995).

In the meantime, I got married to an African-Canadian woman whose descendants on her mother's side were Black loyalists from the American War of Independence who settled in Nova Scotia in the late 18th century and she counts among her ancestors William Hall, the great black Canadian seaman renowned for his services during the Crimean War and Indian Mutiny in the 1850s. My current wife is an African-American woman whose family has long lived on what today is called George Washington's Birthplace Road and for centuries in Westmoreland County, Virginia. Clearly, as is the case with many African

Americans my wife's family has longer roots in the U.S. than most European American families whose ancestors came as immigrants.

So my immediate family is quite cosmopolitan or Afropolitan as they say in Southern Africa: my father has Botswana citizenship, my son is a Malawian, my daughter a Canadian, and my wife an American. I have first cousins who are of South African, Zimbabwean, and several other African and non-African nationalities. Thus, the African, global, and diasporic scope of my scholarly work springs as much from my autobiography as from my academic research interests. Unlike many history graduate students of my generation, I did my dissertation on countries other than my own. For my master's degree I wrote on Tanzania and for my doctorate on Kenya. Most of my major publications beginning with the award-winning *A Modern Economic History of Africa* (1993) have focused on Africa as a whole rather than the sub-Saharan canard of Eurocentric historiography.

My fascination with Africa's place in the world informs much of my recent work as evident in *Rethinking Africa's Globalization* (2003) and the edited two-volume collection, *The Study of Africa*, which examines the way Africa has been studied in the major social science and humanities disciplines and in different world regions including Europe, Asia and the Pacific, North and South America, and the Caribbean. This book represents my deepening immersion into diaspora studies. My intellectual gravitation to diaspora studies started in my youth, although in the 1960s the term African diasporas was hardly used. The growth of African diaspora studies as a distinctive field is quite recent thanks to complex intellectual, institutional, and ideological developments within and outside the academy. This includes the rise of cultural, postcolonial, and globalization studies that recast Africa's transnational engagements, and the establishment of diaspora studies programs and publication outlets. Also, the exponential rise in African global migrations was accompanied by growing assertiveness among the diasporas themselves who were increasingly valued by African states for their remittances.

Before many of us in my youth became aware of the global dimensions of the African diaspora as such, we knew about black people in the Americas brought there through the barbaric history of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Our attitudes to the Americas, especially the United States, were ambivalent. For many of us growing up in the newly independent African states in the 1960s, the U.S. and the West more generally seduced us with its modernity, its immense possibilities, its African diaspora presence. Besides our own national and regional popular cultures, we grew up listening to the inimitable sounds of Motown, admiring the incomparable sportsmanship of the Brazilian soccer maestro, Pele, and the telegenic boxer, Muhammad Ali. As we matured we were gripped by the civil rights struggles and defiant oratory of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X among many others. Later in college we read Frantz Fanon's searing indictment of the psychologies and pathologies of racism, and we were introduced to the novels of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison with their harrowing tales of the savagery of segregation in the United States and the heroic struggles by black people for survival, sanity, and citizenship. We felt an intimate familiarity with the West for its modernity built on the backs of our peoples' exploitation and dehumanization.

The project from which this book is drawn gave me an incredible opportunity to study African diasporas around the world. It began its present life in Nairobi in 2002 when I met my great friend Tade Aina, who was then Ford Foundation Representative for Eastern Africa. Tade told me of a visit of Indian Siddis to East Africa the Foundation had sponsored.



He wondered whether I might be interested in doing a project on African diasporas in the Atlantic world. We continued discussing this in the subsequent months and years. The idea grew, became more intriguing, more appealing. I thought to myself, why limit myself to the Atlantic, and not do a global history of African diasporas? Such a project would marry my longstanding interests in world history, globalization, Pan-Africanism, and international relations, and my emerging interests in transnational African migrations, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and diaspora studies. In 2005, I decided to apply for a grant from the Ford Foundation for a global project on African diasporas, entitled "Africa and Its Diasporas: Dispersals and Linkages."

The project sought to map out the dispersal of African peoples in all the major world regions, including Asia, Europe, and the Americas; compare the processes of diaspora formation within and among these regions, and examine the ebbs and flows in linkages between these diasporas and Africa over time. Besides the historical accounting of these processes and dynamics, I sought to contribute to the theoretical literature on diasporas in general and African diasporas in particular. By the time I applied for the grant, I had started writing and publishing papers seeking to elucidate the conceptual challenges in diaspora studies. I have continued doing so over the last few years as the theoretical and methodological issues have become clearer and sharper from my deepening engagement with the vast literature in the field. Since the project began, I have collected hundreds of books and thousands of articles on this infinitely complex and fascinating subject. I promised the Ford Foundation three sets of products, first, a series of theoretical essays, second, a memoir of my travels, and third, scholarly volumes on each of the three aspects of the project. With this book, I deliver on the second.

My first thanks, then, go to the Ford Foundation and Tade Aina who provided me with sufficient resources to travel to more than a dozen countries in South and North America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia to conduct extensive research on African diaspora communities. The countries were carefully chosen, based on my knowledge at the time the proposal was written, to represent different trajectories of African diaspora histories, cultures, identities, and possibilities. If I were to write the proposal now, it is possible I would have come up with a slightly different cast of countries. But I believe the countries recorded in this volume offer fascinating insights into the diverse experiences of African diasporas that are rich in their own right and in comparative perspective. As far as I know, this is the most extensive survey on African diaspora ever undertaken by any one scholar, let alone an African scholar. Given the vast scope of the project, the numerous people who helped me either in making contacts, agreeing to be interviewed, or simply sharing their views or companionship, trying to list all of them would take pages. But I owe special thanks to several people who helped me to make contacts in the following countries: Ben Vinson III for Venezuela and Mexico; Diane Pinderhughes and Kim Butler for Brazil; Marsha Figaro and Nixon Camilien for Haiti; John Long and Ani Ekpenyong for Germany; Wangui wa Goro and Onyekachi Wambu for Britain; Mamadou Diouf and Giulia Bonacci for France; Lynette Jackson and María de Los Angeles Torres for Cuba; Antumi Toasije for Spain; Ajay Dubey and Renu Modi for India; and Ahmed Sikainga, Salah Hassan and Alamin Mazrui for the Gulf states of Qatar, Dubai, and Oman. In each of these countries I benefitted from the generosity of many people including those who served as research assistants or key interlocutors. I am particularly indebted to Alejandro Correa and Roger Baker in Venezuela; Alessandra Mello da Costa, Taynar Pereira, and Veronica in Brazil; Katia Mombrun in Haiti; Danielle Terrazas Williams in Mexico; John Long and Ani Ekpenyong in Germany; Mpalive Msiska in Britain; Cyril

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What I have tried to do in this book is share with you my daily record of impressions, experiences, conversations, observations, and even confusion during the four years I traveled to different countries for the project. I have refrained from editing the daily entries with the advantage of hindsight. I took copious notes when I talked to people, or tried to remember and record my experiences and the conversations immediately after. Every evening I spent long hours, sometimes up to five or six, recording and trying to make sense of my encounters, testimonies, and thoughts. The dozens of people I talked to may not always agree with my rendering of their comments, or our meetings, but this is not meant to be a verbatim record, let alone a collective research travel memoir. It is a personal account. Nevertheless, I apologize in advance for any egregious misrepresentations.

This project took me away from my family for long weeks at a time. I know it was taxing on them, especially my wife, as my two children are now adults and live on their own. It is with deep gratitude that I thank Cassandra for her support and patience, for her willingness to tolerate my long absences and bear with me when I returned exhausted from the grueling trips and daily writing. She was the first to read the entire manuscript and she loved it, and encouraged me to get it published. Natasha and Mwai give me the immeasurable pleasure of fatherhood, and I cherish their support for my professional work, including my numerous writing projects, even if they don't always read my books. I hope they read this one though because it is about their history as part of the new African diaspora.

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza  
Los Angeles, February 2012