

## Exploring Diasporic Media in Africa within the Framework of Social Identity Theory

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**Abstract**

*Africans are intensely dispersed across the world due to conflicts, famine, oppression, and search for greener pasture, business, and quest for sound education. Irrespective of their location, Africans tend to retain their affinity, loyalty, and relate with their homelands and ethnic affiliations in manners defined by the reasons for their dispersion. These relationships are in the areas of their involvement in homeland politics (that is characteristically ethnic in Africa), skills and knowledge transfer, cultures and values propagation, international support mobilisation, and support for development efforts. In all, the media facilitates the Diaspora groups' active and positive involvement in these homeland affairs as it moderates and determines the effectiveness of the relationships. They tend to establish and manage their own media known generally as Diaspora media. This article used the social identity theory to explore the concept of Diaspora media; the various African Diasporic media, and achievements since the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

**Keywords:** *Communication, Diaspora, media and social identity*

**Introduction**

Globalisation, slavery, colonial labour policies, authoritarian leadership, post-colonial conflicts, and economic hardship propelled many African citizens to seek for security, employment, business, and survival outside their homeland. Van-der Veer (1995) estimates that from 1990, more than 300 million 'Africans' have left their national boundaries to live as aliens in other countries. This experience is similar to others in different continents of the world where mass migrations of people known as Diasporas, predominantly from the less developed world to the developed world ensued since late nineteenth century. These include citizens of Eastern Europe Latin America South Asia and Caribbean communities. Although the United States of America and Europe are their primary destinations, they travel to and reside in other countries depending on the reasons for their migration.

These movements and resettlement of people in foreign lands involve greater and new forms of money, goods, information, culture and lifestyle circulations. In addition, there are flows or circulation of capital, technologies and ideas. The pace, scope, character, and the impact of these flows are not pre-determined and systematic but concurrent, disjointed, and

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cracked (Appadurai, 1993). Inevitably, they affect the socio-cultural identities of the travelling individuals, their subsequent generations, and the political economy of their hosts.

Most Africans outside their fatherland form associations. The goals of such associations include, among others, to work for their interests, and preserve their cherished social-cultural identities. Their respective race/ethnic nationalities, homelands and governments exploit this development by seeking their assistance on so many issues such like development aid, technology and skill transfer, international connections, diplomacy, peace and conflict management, and struggle for freedom etc. Therefore, there is an inextricable connection between human migration from one geographical space to another, the socio-cultural dimensions of human existence, and the long process of society's evolution and development (Appadurai, 1993).

The acknowledged links and relations between the Diasporas and their ethnic nationality/race, homelands and government cannot exist without effective communication. Although the Diaspora group is dispersed, technological advancements and innovations in the transport and communication systems drastically reduced the communication gap between them and their homelands (Lyons, 2006). In this article, the social identity theory was used to explain how African emigrants deploy the media to maintain ties both at home and among themselves in foreign countries.

### **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**

Social identity theory (SIT) was initially introduced by Tajfel (1978) and subsequently advanced by Tajfel and Turner (1979). The theory posits that individuals categorize themselves as members of different groups using different indices. For example, it could be researchers with similar interest, fans, emigrants, among others. Together with self-categorization, individuals assess the groups they feel they belong to (in-groups) and groups they do not consider themselves a member of (out-groups). For example, African emigrants in other countries may categorise themselves as Africans in Diaspora (their in-group) while categorizing themselves as not citizens of the countries they reside (out-group). To ascertain the in-groups' and out-groups' worth, individuals constantly categorize themselves, evaluate in-groups and out-groups, and compare their value. Social categorization, group assessment and the value of group memberships for the self-concept constitute an individual's social identity (Trepte & Laura, 2017).

The social identity theory has seven principles that guide it. The first is that people categorize themselves as members of certain social groups such as emigrants. Second, this social group is more or less salient in a certain context (example when at work). An African emigrant may be salient while at work place where he or she has to relate with colleagues. Nonetheless, it might not be at all salient while when African emigrants working in the same place form interest groups. Thirdly, through the instrument of social comparison, people assess their value in-group relative vis-a-vis out-groups. Fourth, positive distinctiveness describes the result of social comparison. If the in-group is assessed more positively than the out-group, people perceive positive distinctiveness. When the assessment shows that such groups confer value on them, they will work hard to maintain it and vice-versa. Fifth, social identity is defined as the combination of self-categorization and its evaluation, and it influences—sixth—an individual's self-esteem. Seventh, a major part of SIT's theoretical groundwork was dedicated to the consequences of this process, namely how individual

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mobility, social creativity, social competition, and stereotyping are affected. These strategies to reinterpret, or even change, group memberships are influenced by subjective belief structures concerning how permeable or stable a group's structure is (Trepte & Laura, 2017). This theory could help in explaining how African emigrants may make efforts to maintain their social identity through Diaspora media.

### The Concept of Diaspora

Scholars tend to define the term Diaspora in a number of different ways. However, According to Blunt (2007, p. 6) it refers to "the mobility of people, capital, ideas and objects, and the production of space, networks and politics by and through such mobility." Other scholars like Mavroudi (2007); Blunt (2005); Hall (1992); Kalra et al. (2005); and Papastergiadis (2000) considering diaspora as a process in relation to the spatial politics of culture, identity and hybridity. It has been studied as connections between 'roots' and 'routes' (Clifford, 1997), and as a conflict between domicility and locations of belonging (Gilroy, 2000).

Nevertheless, Diaspora is a term derived from ancient Greek word *diaspeirō*, which means "a self-identified ethnic group, with a specific place of origin, which has been globally dispersed through voluntary or forced migration" (Vertovec, 2006, p.3). It is employed as a metaphor for dispersal and settlement such as expatriates, alien residents, refugees, immigrants, ethnic/racial minorities (Safran, 1991). Therefore, it refers to an alien community of people with traditional links who are dispersed due to one reason or the other. They share some types of common connection, and retain loyalty and connection to their original native race and/or country. They maintain their traditional ethnic identity, homeland orientation, and the image of the homeland, in spite of their global dispersal (Yossi & Aharon, 2003). They re-root their floating lives, make sense of their constantly changing lives through struggle, and achieve closure of gaps (Shi, 2005).

According to Safran (1991) and Cohen (1997), Diaspora shares some or all of the following attributes, namely:

- a. They are spread from the homeland to two or more countries and bound by a common vision, memory or myth about their homelands;
- b. They hold the belief that they will never be accepted by their host societies and share autonomous cultural and social needs;
- c. They share the idea that they will return to the homeland if conditions are favourable;
- d. They develop communal consciousness and solidarity that enable them to maintain support for their ancestral homelands.
- e. They must have spent sufficient time period outside their homelands to attract the attention and strong recognition of their hosts of their presence; and
- f. They form a collective identity in the place of their settlement, their homeland, and share a common identity with members of the same ethnic communities in other countries.

Africans in Diaspora in a bid to protect their social identity may rely on the media to maintain ties among themselves and with their homeland.

### **Contributions of Diaspora to Their Homelands**

The contributions of the Diaspora are normally in the form of involvement in their homeland politics, transfer of skills and knowledge from their countries of domicile to their homelands, propagating the cultures and promoting the values of their homeland (De Haas, 2006). They equally raise funds, weapons, and mobilize international supports for their governments, ethnic affiliation and/or insurgent actors in their homelands. Consequently, Antwi-Boateng (2011) and Sheffer (2006) note that the Diaspora possess the ability and the tendency to incite violence from their countries of domicile with little risk or none to themselves in their homelands.

### **The African Diaspora**

It is difficult to get an accurate statistics of Africans in Diaspora due to illegal migrations. However, some sources estimate that the contemporary African Diasporas are more than 30 million as at 2009 with 7.2 million of them living in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries; six million in North America; one million in the United States, 282,600 in Canada; and 4.7 million in Europe (IFAD, 2009; Bossard, 2009). This excludes African migrants between 2010 and 2018, and others living in Asian countries such as China, Japan, Singapore, Philippines etc; and Russia, which numbers over 10 million. Van-der Veer (1995) therefore estimated that 300 million Africans live outside their national boundaries.

This high rate of migration involves the educated and skilled Africans. As noted by OECD (2002, p. 11), “more than one third of Africa’s highly qualified human resources are in the Diaspora”. Vice-Presidency Operations II (Sector Operations) of the Fragile States Unit (OSFU) in the African Development Bank (n.d pp. 4-5) summarised this scenario as follows:

Across Africa, poor political, social and economic environment has exacerbated the brain drain and this in turn has fueled institutional weaknesses and state failure. High rates of emigration of healthcare and other professionals has been widely documented across the Africa region, to the extent, there may be more doctors of Ethiopian origin practicing in Chicago than in Addis Ababa; more than half of Nigeria’s academic personnel may be working abroad; and three quarters of all Ghanaian and Zimbabwean doctors leave within a few years of completing medical school, among others.

### **The Concept of Diaspora Media and the Social Identity Theory**

The Diaspora community establishes media outlet(s) or platforms that enable them to express themselves, present their cultural artefacts and contest negative stereotypes publicly. Such media, which is known as Diaspora media, is defined as “the media that are produced by and for migrants and deal with issues that are of specific interest of the members of diasporic communities” (Bozdog et al., 2012, p. 97). Such media are meant to project and protect the social identity of those in Diaspora. The overall aim is to ensure that the identities of emigrants is maintained. The dynamics of Diasporic media is characterised by processes ranging from “the epistolary technology of letters, telephone, fax, and email to the audio-

visual media of photos, cassettes, films, and videos, to print, electronic, and cyberspace journalism” (Naficy, 1999, p.4).

The media have the capacity to moderate and determine the relationships that exist between Diasporas and their homeland. Thus, the essence of the Diaspora media is to produce;

- a. Culturally relevant and locally vital information to immigrants in the host society (Yin, 2013, p. 3);
- b. Orientation and connective roles (Ogunyemi, 2012b);
- c. Open space for a self-reflective discourse among migrants (Bozdag et al., 2012);
- d. Reinforce identities and sense of belonging (Georgiou, 2006);
- e. Platform for people resisting economic, cultural, and political disfranchisement, which enables them to struggle and negotiate on behalf of their specific interests/values (Castells, 1997, p. 356);
- f. Creation and re-creation of alternative imaginative space alongside existing mappings (Karim, 2003);
- g. Provide points of cultural identification through which they can imagine continuous identities and hence create desirable meanings of their ruptured and shifting identities (Shi, 2005);
- h. More effective mobilisation of bottom-up redefinition of the power of dispersed groups to form new bonds of cohesiveness; and
- i. Contribution to the ethnic diversity of a multi-ethnic public sphere (Husband, 2000, p. 206).

The formation and operation of Diasporic media across the world have been enhanced in the contemporary times by innovations and advances in information technology, international waves of democratisation, increased audience, and evolving political climates particularly in the Third World nations (Matsaganis et al., 2011, p. xiv). In most cases and serving as hybrid of alternative to highly censored mainstream media, it is used for information dissemination, entertainment, engagement, commerce and faith (Bozdag et al., 2012, pp. 99–100). It enables the Diasporas to pursue their homeland programmes and reshape the course of events particularly in a conflict situation towards peace. Anecdotal evidences abound in the literature that the media facilitates Diaspora groups’ active and positive involvement in the conflict resolution in their homelands (Byman et al., 2001; Shain and Barth, 2003; Musifiky, 2009; Asemah, 2011). The social identity theory could be used to explain the establishment and operation of Diaspora media because it provides a framework for understanding how people make efforts to protect and promote their identities even outside of their ancestral homes. It also goes to show the role of the media in constructing and preserving social identities.

### **African Diaspora Media**

The emergence of the new media between 1990s and 2000s due to innovations in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) enabled the emergence of African Diasporic Media. The Internet and new media, which are principal components of the era, were adopted by many African migrants to form and consolidate their Diaspora communities across the world. It provides alternative background or platform for the engagement of the

ethnic identities and civil society in their homelands in the face of government high level censorship of the mainstream media.

African Diaspora media is characteristically Internet based. They are not established as distinct media outfits; rather they employ the services or tools of the Internet and Cyberspace particularly the social media channels to communicate or carry out their agenda with their homelands. African Diasporas created many Websites, which are being used for numerous purposes and different themes, linked to specific countries, regions, and/or even tribes.

The Cameroonian Diaspora Media provides a good illustration here. The background of Cameroonian Diaspora's media operations is laid by popular experiences of relatively limited exposure to the mass media of their homeland. Back home, people have virtually no access to mainstream media, except for their access to and use of the Internet, because of government monopoly and censorship (Mainsah, 2009).

The Diaspora use the Internet to listen to Cameroonian radio programmes particularly music, which brings back memories of home and accentuates feelings of nostalgia and loss to them. This is because cable and satellite channel packages on offer hardly provide television channels from Cameroon. They equally use the Internet to receive and/or read news from their homeland. This is because major actors in the newspaper sector adapted themselves to have online versions. Through this, the Diasporas attempt to electronically revive the relationships that existed before migration (Karim, 1998). Their responses and comments are always in the forms of emails, tweets, and Internet voice conferences and calls.

Nevertheless, many are dedicated to providing information with regards to Africa as a continent. Some examples of well-known media of African Diasporas include Bright Entertainment Television, The Africa Channel, Klear TV, Voice of Africa Radio, and African Voice. They became major channels of information, sensitisation, mobilisation, and present easier access to information regarding news and trends in Africa as:

- a. They contribute to the formation of a coherent African diaspora;
- b. They allow for greater connections between the Diasporas and their countries or lands of origin thereby creating transnational community, one that is dispersed but linked;
- c. They provide alternative discussion platforms and forum for all strata of the African society;
- d. They provide true space for free exchanges between citizens, which led to the formation and consolidation of transnational civil society;
- e. They ushered in genuine democratic pressures in Africa that made it possible for opposition parties to win incumbent governments in general elections;
- f. They enable the African Diasporas to take part in socio-political and economic debates and be involved in African public life from their places of foreign domicile and
- g. They gave a voice to the alienated and oppressed oppositions, and provide regular information to the outside world particularly their hosts on events in Africa.

Examples of few specifically and distinctively established African Diaspora Media include:

## 1. Radio Biafra

Radio Biafra is transmitting on 15.460 megahertz at 19-metre band to give voice to the aspiration of the Igbo people at home and in the Diaspora. Its headquarters is located in Washington DC, USA.

The Radio station was established among other issues;

- i. To sensitize the world about Igbo marginalization in Nigeria;
- ii. To expose the lack of respect for and protection of lives and property of the Igbos in Nigeria;
- iii. To expose federal government total neglect of infrastructural development in Igbo land;
- iv. To campaign for the payment of reparation to Ndigbo for lives and property lost during and after the Nigeria-Biafra war (Chiluwa, 2018).

## 2. Somalia Voice

The clannish civil war that broke out in Somalia in 1991 orchestrated the mass exodus of Somalis out of their homelands. Such persons are scattered across many regions of the world, communicating, regrouping, sharing views and helping their groups at home (Issa-Salwe, 2011, p. 54). Thus, Somali Diaspora media are many and owned by individuals some of whom are major stakeholders and investors (Integrity Report, 2013) with different political, economic, and social interests. This accounts for their multiplicity and differential services.

According to Issa-Salwe (2011), Somali Diasporic media are categorized into seven, namely:

- a. Community/Political: These Websites or Diasporic media focus on political developments and community news from Somalia.
- b. Cultural/Literacy: These Websites or Diasporic media focus the preservation and dissemination of Somali literature and culture.
- c. Professional/Business: These Websites or Diasporic media focus on promoting online businesses and professional bodies.
- d. Newspapers: These are online versions of existing newspapers.
- e. Religious Affairs: These Websites or Diasporic media focus on Islamic teachings and information concerning different Islamic groups, ideologies, and activities in Somali communities.
- f. Personal Websites: These Websites or Diasporic media focus anything that is of interest to the particular individual that opened them.
- g. Radio/TV: These Websites or Diasporic media focus on issues covered by newspapers and other mainstream radio and TV stations. As at 2011, there were 9 of such TV stations (Ismail, 2006).

The primary feature of the various Somali diasporic media is that they transmit and communicate their programmes only in Somali language. This was necessitated by their primary goals or aims, which were to establish and maintain relations with their respective homeland families; and to receive sustained information about Somali conflict and economy.

This made the various media vehicles for direct participation in the mediated communications process and the extension of the voices of Somali Diaspora groups. They empowered the Somali Diasporas to:

- a. Inform one another of Somalia, its changing political dynamics, humanitarian conditions and warring ideological affiliations;
- b. Voicing their own opinion or contribute to debates and discussion concerning developments in their homeland;
- c. Adapt Western technologies to their individual and national situational needs;
- d. Support and/or sponsor clannish factional groups involved in their homeland conflict.

### **Achievements and Challenges of African Diaspora Media**

African Diaspora media have recorded monumental achievements or successes. These include:

1. They help to reconnect and maintain the relationship. between the Diasporas and their homeland race/country.
2. They provide effective platform for Diasporas' participation in the socio-economic, political, and cultural development of their homelands.
3. They provide information in their respective homelands to the international community amid government monopoly, control, and censorship of the mainstream media.
4. They provided activism platform for the oppressed, marginalised, persecuted groups, civil society, and opposition in their homelands.
5. They helped the Diaspora to reconnect and mobilise themselves for common national and international actions.

### **Social Identity theory and Diaspora Media: Concluding Argument**

From the discourse so far, it could be seen that one of the critical motivations for the establishment of Diaspora media is to maintain the social identity of those who are outside their homeland. Their intention is to protect their social identities in foreign land and identify with their groups. That is, those in their fatherland. It is like an attempt to ensure that a person's social identity is not submerged in the midst of people with other identities. The media are thus, regarded as essential conduits through which people who are outside their country homes establish and maintain their social identities. Therefore, this paper argues that when people are outside of their countries, they deploy the instrument of the media to create and maintain their social identities while identifying with those of similar identities who may be separated by distance. Therefore, the basic contribution of this study is that it has been able to use the social identity theory to explain how those in Diaspora use the media to create and maintain their identities. This understanding has added a fresh perspective to the social identity theory by showing that it could be a relevant framework for examining the establishment and use of Diaspora media. The researcher, therefore, makes the following recommendations: First, further studies should be conducted to provide empirical insights into challenges for operating Diaspora media. It is also recommended that the media use pattern of those in the Diaspora should be examined to provide insights into their media



consumption pattern. Finally, further researchers should examined the coverage of those in the Diaspora in traditional media like radio, TV, newspaper and magazines.

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