Looking Towards the Motherland The Roles of the African Academic Diaspora in Knowledge Production in Africa

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Abstract
In the past 20 or so years, the African diaspora's engagement in universities in Africa has inspired numerous studies. This article contributes to this literature both empirically and theoretically. Questioning the nationalism paradigm, which chiefly attributes African diaspora academics' interventions in African higher education institutions to patriotism, it argues that any explanation of the privileged forms of this engagement ought to consider two major factors. The first is that African diaspora scholars have been socialised in a strong colonial-era ideological imperative, which values engagement in Africa; their socio-professional relevance on their continent of origin should thus be assessed in this light. The second factor is that African diaspora academics are integrated into professional foreign academic institutions with their own rules and high stakes. While they are urged to serve in Africa, they are also required to excel in their local institution and at the global academic level. Given the time constraints this imposes, diaspora academics' engagement in Africa is confined to roles that are compatible with the expectations imposed by Western academia.

Key Words: diaspora, African academics, higher education, engagement, Africa

Au cours des vingt et quelques dernières années, la question de l'investissement des universitaires africains de la diaspora dans l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique a inspiré une abondante littérature. Cet article enrichit cette littérature tant sur le plan empirique que sur le plan théorique. Interrogeant le paradigme du nationalisme, qui attribue essen-

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tiellement au patriotisme l'engagement des universitaires de la diaspora dans les universités d'Afrique, cet article développe l'argument selon lequel l'explication des formes privilégiées de l'engagement de cette diaspora doit tenir en compte deux facteurs principalement. Le premier facteur est que les chercheurs en diaspora ont été socialisés dans un puissant impératif idéologique de l'ère coloniale, qui valorise le service de l'Afrique, à l'aune duquel est évaluée leur utilité socioprofessionnelle sur le continent. Le second est que les universitaires en question sont intégrés dans des institutions académiques étrangères ayant leurs propres règles et enjeux. Pendant qu'ils sont appelés à servir l'Afrique, ils sont aussi contraints d'exceller dans leur institution locale et aussi à l'échelle universitaire mondiale. En même temps que toutes ces attentes pèsent sur eux, ces chercheurs ont aussi besoin d'y satisfaire dans un contexte historique particulier caractérisé par le déficit de temps. Ils sont ainsi tenus de s'investir dans l'enseignement supérieur africain en choisissant et en jouant un ensemble de rôles qui sont compatibles avec les attentes de performance vis-à-vis d'eux au sein leur institution de rattachement.

Key words: Diaspora, Universitaires africains, Enseignement supérieur, Engagement, Afrique

Introduction

This article examines the roles of the African diaspora in knowledge production in post-colonial Africa. Such a project may seem irrelevant in light of the popular view of the academic community as a global one. Indeed, since the 18th century, the idea of the national or ethnic boundedness of both the scholar and scholarship has been called into question. Scholars are considered free from national allegiance and as dedicating their time and energy to the development of a commonwealth of ideas. In turn, scholarship represents this commonwealth of ideas, which no particular nation or continent can lay specific claim to as it is supposed to benefit humanity as a whole. Upholding this view of the national unboundedness of the scholar, the German philosopher Leibniz stated in the 18th century: "The country where it [science] thrives will always be the dearest to me because the whole human species will take advantage of it" (quoted in Gaillard and Gaillard, 1999). About a century later, the French biologist, Louis Pasteur, echoed this view when he asserted that "science knows no country, because knowledge belongs to humanity" (Lerch, 1999).

As this universalist view of the scholar and scholarship has gained traction, many other standpoints have competed with it. Two examples are of interest. First, countries and continents are still used as units of analysis. Their share in the total wealth of publications is still publicly recorded and presented as a measurement of their scientific worth and rank. Many recent studies thus point to Africa's low ranking in global research output and its marginal contribution to research. According to Fonn et al., in 2012, Africa contributed only 0.72% of global research output. In 2008, the total number of papers published on the continent amounted to 27,000, "the same number as the Netherlands" (Fonn, Ayiro, Cotton, Habib, Mbithi, Mtenje, Nawangwe, Ogunbodede, Golooba-Mutebi, and Ezeh, 2018, p. 1163). Second, reflections on brain drain, which emerged in the late 1960s and remains an issue in some academic circles, are grounded in a nationalistic approach, with studies explicitly claiming that a scholar is the product and citizen of a given country – often associated with his/her country of birth – and that rightful ownership of his/her expertise belongs to his/her country of birth. In line with this assumption, the Indian-born economist Jagdish Bhagwati advocated for the taxation of receiving countries and compensation for sending countries for the loss of their most skilled citizens. This unorthodox idea constitutes a paradigmatic expression of the national boundedness of the scholar and scholarship.[1] However, since the 1990s, a new perspective has emerged, under the name 'diaspora option'. This theoretical approach develops an analysis of scholars as actors of multiple national allegiances who are mindful of their ties with their countries of origin while still being well-grounded in their country of adoption. In so doing, the 'diaspora option' challenges the Manichean nationalist assumption, which likens scholars' mobility to the principle of communicating vessels, with a sending country losing all to a receiving country. It also distances itself from the utopian assumption of the universalist approach, which considers scholarship and the scholar as free of national ties.

The 'diaspora option', also rendered by the term 'brain circulation', is based on two major arguments. The first is that the technological revolution of the late 20th century, embodied by the invention of the Internet, has significantly reduced the distance between these highly educated migrants in particular and their country of origin. Countries thus have many opportunities to tap into the expertise of their dislocated citizens (Meyer, Brown, and Kaplan, 2000; Teferra, 2003). The second argument is that these social actors have preserved an organic attachment to their country of birth simply by virtue of originating from there (Gaillard and Gaillard, 1997; Gueye, 2001). The ultimate implication of these two arguments is that circulation of the ideas and know-how of diaspora scholars from their current location to the African continent has become a tangible outcome. Maximisation of its outcome then depends on African states' willingness to develop the appropriate tools to enable them to tap into this expertise.

1. Bhagwati first advanced this proposition in his article, The United States in the Nixon Era: The End of Innocence (1972). He elaborated on it in subsequent articles and books, including, *Taxing the Brain Drain* (1976).

For example, Damtew Teferra (2005) highlights these states' responsibility to guarantee a democratic environment in which the diaspora could freely express their thoughts and deploy their ideas, and to create reliable communication infrastructure for them to channel their ideas to Africa.

Building critically on this literature, this article examines the African academic diaspora's participation in knowledge production in post-colonial Africa. The questions it addresses are: What roles do diaspora academics assume in this process? Which criteria determine the choice of these specific roles rather than others? What logic(s) preside(s) over the selection of the direct beneficiaries of their intervention in knowledge production in Africa?

Arguments and Contentions

The exploration of this line of inquiry is justified by two factors. The first is that the existing literature has largely overlooked the conceptualisation of the expression 'knowledge production' while discussing the engagement of this diaspora. Knowledge production has often been narrowly synonymised with research output. Yet, as will be discussed below, the former concept is more extensive and complex than the latter. The second issue is that the diaspora's roles have been reductively attributed to patriotism (Zeleza, 2013; Ouédraogo and Maïté, 2011). A major problem with this line of thought is that patriotism is often naturalised, or taken-for-granted, as if one was born a patriot. Yet one's patriotism is always a process, and this needs to be explored. More importantly, patriotism cannot suffice as a chief analytical element of the diaspora's intervention in knowledge production in Africa as such intervention emerges from their interactions with real actors, rather than an abstract continent. Given that their roles are partly defined through these interactions, the analysis should focus not on patriotism, but on the origins and meanings of such interactions.

My first argument is that the African diaspora's roles in knowledge production in post-colonial Africa proceed from their negotiation of the orders and rules set in two separate spheres of socialisation, namely, the African academic sphere, and the Western academic sphere in which these scholars are integrated. Prescriptive rules and norms constrain highly educated Africans from engaging on the African continent. During the colonial era, the African intellectual and political elites prescribed that highly educated Africans should contribute to the development of the continent.[2] The Western academic sphere has its own set of norms, principles, and rules, as well as professional stakes, including competition for local and global academic visibility and distinction, and scholars' gratuitous contribution to the preservation and reproduction of their academic institution. Participation in peer-reviews of submissions, and in various teaching or research committees, or professional boards are examples of such contributions. Such participation is formally philanthropic, although scholars do not hesitate to turn it into a resource to promote themselves in their own institution, and even sometimes in the global academic field.

2. See Jean-Pierre Ndiaye (1962), and Sékou Traoré (1973).

The second argument is that the African academic diaspora translates engagement in Africa into a myriad of roles that fit with the set of norms and stakes in force within the Western academic world. Analysing the roles of this diaspora in knowledge production in post-colonial Africa thus necessitates acknowledgement of their double inscription in two spheres, each with its specific constraints, rules, and stakes. It also calls for a critical analysis of the meaning of knowledge production. Instead of approaching it as an end-product, its double characteristic as a process on the one hand, and a system on the other, needs to be taken into account.

I assess the value of these arguments by culling from a large set of data collected among African academics. The analysis is based on a survey of 102 researchers based in African universities. The rationale for this methodological strategy is to assess what actors based in Africa testify about the diaspora's intervention on the continent rather than reporting what the diaspora claims for themselves.

The Multiple Stages of Knowledge Production

As philosopher Jean-Godefroy Bidima (1995) reminds us, definition always evokes delimitation. Whether it generates consensus or opposition, the act of definition implies one of delimitation of the boundaries of a concept, mainly for the purpose of creating shared meaning between authors and their readership. Most scholars in the social sciences, in particular, are familiar with the term knowledge production. However, this does not guarantee that they share the same understanding of the term; hence, the need to pinpoint from the onset what is meant by this term in this article. I conceive knowledge production firstly as an (intellectual) process. As such, it is more than an end-result – which the publication of a body of thought such as a journal article or a book signifies. The production of knowledge integrates an undetermined number of stages, including identification of the pertinent literature to engage with, (re)interpretation of this literature, and arrangement of the arguments or ideas composing one's novel contribution to the existing sum of knowledge. Thus, as an (intellectual) process, knowledge production is a fundamentally social dynamic as each of these stages expose authors of the body of thought to interaction with real scholars from whom, or in contention with whom, they either learn how to identify the relevant literature or arrange their own arguments and ideas.

Not only is knowledge production a process, but it is also a system in the classical sense of this term. Ludwig Von Bertalanffy conceives a system as a set of interdependent elements; that is, they are related to one another in such a way that the modification of one element would result in the modification of the whole set (1968). In post-colonial Africa, which is the reference period for this article, the university has claimed the hegemonic function of a space of elaboration, preservation, and dissemination of the legitimate form of knowledge. To the extent that African academics subscribe to such a claim, the question of knowledge production is unavoidably a reflection on the existence and the state of academic spaces where research and teaching take place; the existence and quality of the individuals assigned to these activities; the presence of active learners; the existence and value of publication outlets (journals and publishing houses); on the availability of material resources that are indispensable to the elaboration of novel and original thought (libraries, laboratories with relevant equipment); and even on the mode of organisation and governance of the university as an institution.

As a system, knowledge production is also undeniably and fundamentally social. To begin with, authors in any particular discipline or school of thought depend on a number of crucial resources in order to efficiently perform their intellectual activities. University infrastructure, a well-furnished and up-to-date library or laboratory, and sufficient time to devote to thinking and writing are just some examples of these resources. Access to such resources is all but universal, democratic, and automatic. On the contrary, some are relatively scarce and are therefore extended only to a small number of privileged or fortunate academics, and in many cases their access implies the deployment of individual strategies and negotiation with other academic agents who presumably control the distribution of these resources. As a system, the production of knowledge is also contingent upon the rule of mutual judgment by peers, known as peer-review. The ideas sketched by scholars before they are turned into a final product such as a book or an article are (often anonymously) submitted for validation to other scholars who act in the capacity of referees. Referees often work in the same field of expertise as the authors of these ideas and are in principle the ultimate judges of the worth of the ideas. Cognisant of the peer-review rule, scholars who seek the most desirable outcome during this validation rarely submit their ideas for publication before running them by other colleagues that are accessible to them. These colleagues are expected to be relatively knowledgeable about the topic and likely to foresee the weaknesses and strengths of the paper before the ultimate referees identify them. Through this offer and demand for intellectual services, scholars contribute to sustaining the knowledge production system, as

they maintain themselves in relations of inter-dependence with other scholars. As academics seek global circulation of their ideas, and as they value face-to-face exchanges, which the multiplicity of international conferences, congresses, and symposia offer, they are able to run their ideas by scholars in other countries that are affiliated to foreign institutions. The latter scholars whose preliminary judgment (known as 'friendly review') authors seek are therefore not necessarily immediate colleagues and they can manifest any national identity, including a black African one.

This conception of knowledge production as a complex process and a system theoretically suggests that it is possible for African diaspora scholars to engage in the intellectual dynamics taking place in Africa. While this diaspora is usually absent from the continent, the technological revolution means that physical distance is no longer an impediment to their involvement in knowledge production in Africa should they choose to abide by the ideological imperative of the colonial era African intellectual elite highlighted by Jean-Pierre Ndiaye and Sékou Traoré. Provided that they are eager to contribute to the production of knowledge in Africa, the African academic diaspora's dilemma is to abide by this ideology while complying with the norms, rules, and stakes of the Western academic world in which they operate.

Mechanisms to Participate in Knowledge Production

My research in Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Ethiopia between 2012 and 2017, which I resumed recently, shows that African academics are significantly engaged in knowledge production in Africa. The data collected thus far from 102 Africa-based academics to assess the level and forms of their relationships with diaspora academics reveal the significant scale of the latter's intervention in higher education on the continent. Indeed, only 18 of these academics reported no connection with scholars based in the diaspora. Two conclusions can be drawn from this scale of diaspora involvement. The first is that it dispels the assertion of some late 20th century African thinkers that African intellectuals who chose to settle outside Africa are disinterested in the various dynamics taking place on the continent (Traoré, 1973, 1985; Diané, 1990). Secondly, it validates the intuition of most students of the African academic diaspora who have concluded, often on the basis of anecdotal evidence, that the diaspora has extensive engagement in Africa (Brown, 2003; Teferra, 2003; Zeleza, 2013).

The diaspora's intervention in African higher education institutions translates into a myriad of roles. The data reveal nine different roles, including co-writing articles or research proposals with Africa-based colleagues; co-organisation of conferences or colloquia in Africa; contribution of articles in volumes published by Africa-based colleagues; friendly review

of work by colleagues in Africa; invitations to Africa-based colleagues to visit foreign universities; granting research or conference funding to Africa-based colleagues; co-teaching or supervision of students with Africa-based colleagues; donating academic material (computer, books, etc.) to colleagues in Africa; and transmission of information relevant to the academic promotion of Africa-based colleagues.

While these activities involve different levels of engagement, they all benefit Africa-based academics, and therefore knowledge production in Africa. For instance, co-organising a conference is a step forward in the production of knowledge. Papers presented at conferences sometimes lay the ground for more complete texts, thanks to the criticisms and suggestions received from conference attendees. Revised conference papers thus become published articles or book chapters that increase Africa's contribution to global academic research and boost the publication record of Africa-based academics.

Furthermore, some of these roles are more common than others. Of the exchanges mentioned by Africa-based researchers with their diaspora colleagues, 120 out of 132 fell into one of the roles described above. They were distributed as follows:

- 35% of these exchanges fell under co-writing of articles or research proposals;
- 0.83% were co-organisation of a conference;
- 5.8% were contribution of an article to a volume;
- 15% were friendly reviews;
- 13.3% were invitations to visit a diaspora scholar's university;
- 10% were co-teaching;
- 15% fell under gifts of academic material; and
- 5% were sharing of relevant information.

Co-authorship of articles or research proposals represent the lion's share, while co-organising conferences is rare. Gifts of academic material and friendly review (both at 15%) were the two other roles most favoured by the diaspora. These findings raise the question of the reasons and therefore the rationale for the diaspora's choices of the roles they assume.

The reasons behind the diaspora's decision to favour certain roles have not been problematised by scholars of the African diaspora, or, indeed, other diasporas. In his report to the Carnegie Corporation, historian Zeleza noted the diversity of the diaspora's roles in African higher education, but did not classify them, let alone analyse their hierarchy (Zeleza, 2013). Many other studies on the diaspora have failed to address this question, mainly because they were not grounded in empirical research (Charum, Granes, and Meyer, 1996; Meyer, 2003; Meyer, Brown, Kaplan, and Meyer, 2002; Brown, 2003; Teferra, 2017). However, the diaspora's preference for specific roles and by implication, rejection of others largely follows the rules and stakes informing the academic world. It also results from individual factors, including the strength of the diaspora's embeddedness in the African academic setting. This strength is measured by the series of relationships that a diaspora scholar initially develops with researchers affiliated to an Africa-based institution. Examples of strong embeddedness include being a former colleague of a researcher based in Africa; a former graduate mentee of a colleague working in Africa; and being a former supervisor of a colleague based in Africa.

Academic Rules and Stakes

Contemporary academics have two chief concerns. The first is to perform roles that would enhance their position in local and global academic systems, while the second is to develop strategies to devote most of their time to activities that sustain their scholarly advancement. These concerns proceed from the organisation of the 21st century academic world. While modern academia values most of the roles listed above, it accords them unequal prestige and consideration.[3] For instance, co-authorship of a book or article carries more weight than co-teaching a class. Distinguished authors of publications receive international awards, while teaching excellence is mainly recognised at university level or at best, national level. As modern academia embraces the logic of productivity and diversification of services, contemporary academics struggle with time constraints within their own institution. While they are under pressure to perform academically, their tasks constantly multiply, eating into the time they should devote to research and publications. The multiplicity of these tasks largely results from the growth of the student population, the increase in the number of committees, and many other factors.

Every role performed by academics has an academic value and implies the expenditure of a specific amount of time. It is on the basis of these two factors (the value of the role, and the time expenditure it presupposes) that diaspora academics decide on the roles they favour in their engagement in Africa. Co-writing an article is more likely to enhance the status of a diaspora academic in Western and global academia than co-teaching a course in Africa. The significant amount of time spent in performance of the former role thus seems more rewarding than the almost equal amount

3. Several studies on the organisation of modern academia mention the division of labour within the academic system. However, they rarely incorporate a systematic analysis of the hierarchy of the tasks involved in their professional activities. In her book, *How Professors Think*, Michèle Lamont (2009) hints at this hierarchy. Other studies include Beaver and Rosen (1978), and Babchuck, Keith, and Peters (1999).

of time spent on the latter. This hierarchy is the result of the imperative to publish that is in force in most Western universities; the injunction to 'publish or perish' as coined by Robert Merton (1957). The particularity of this role is to reconcile a diaspora scholar's engagement in knowledge production in Africa with the duty to perform intellectually in the Western academic world.

Faced with constraining academic rules, the African academic diaspora opts for roles which are less costly in terms of time (such as donating academic material), unless a more time-consuming role produces an outcome that sustains their academic status in the Western or global academic sphere. To a certain extent, this need to balance the imperatives of productivity and of serving the community explain the relatively significant level of preference for donating academic material whereas co-organising conferences in Africa is hardly an option, and co-teaching classes on the continent is even less frequent. Instrumental in the production of knowledge for scholars located in Africa, these gifts enable the diaspora to fulfil the need to serve Africa while using the precious time at their disposal to advance their own academic status.

Reaching Out to Those who are Close

Whatever role the African diaspora assumes, benefits, both large and small, accrue to knowledge production on the African continent. A good example is the increase in academic publications authored or co-authored by academics based at African universities. However, in reality, the diaspora engages with Africa through the mediation of real individuals, namely, scholars affiliated to African universities. It is thus important to take these individual scholars, as well as their characteristics into consideration in understanding the criteria used by the diaspora to select the roles they choose to perform. Indeed, while the institutional elements discussed above (time expenditure and the outcome of the role) certainly determine the diaspora's selection of roles, the identity of the Africa-based scholars and their relationships with diaspora academics inform this selection.

Like any individual, diaspora scholars are enmeshed in what Paul Ricoeur (2005) called an "infinite mutual indebtedness". This notion refers to a raft of duties or obligations; it posits that individuals always (partially) owe their personal achievements to other individuals or organisations that supported them. By receiving, they are expected to give to either the same or other actors who could benefit from their support. The diaspora scholars' professional trajectory and their evolution would not have been possible without the contribution of scholars based in Africa. For example, the latter could have served as mentors, supervisors, or colleagues. This has instilled a sense of duty among the diaspora to scholars who are involved in various

activities in Africa. Such relationships contribute to determining the choice of roles. The survey conducted among 102 Africa-based academics sought to assess the link between the diaspora's embeddedness in African research institutions and their roles in knowledge production. Africa-based scholars were asked to recount the original terms of their relationships with the diaspora academics with whom they have co-published, co-organised a conference, co-taught a class or from whom they have received an invitation to visit a foreign university, have received academic material, etc.

A list of six items was presented:

- The diaspora scholar was a former colleague in the same institution;
- S/he was a classmate during graduate studies;
- S/he was a professor or supervisor;
- S/he is a colleague met at a conference;
- S/he is a colleague met via a third party; and
- S/he is a colleague met virtually.

In terms of co-writing an article or book, 16 of the 35 diaspora scholars and Africa-based scholars were former colleagues in the same institution; nine involved Africa-based researchers and diaspora academics who were their former professor or supervisor; four concerned scholars from the two groups who were classmate during graduate studies; five involved academics from the two groups who met at a conference, and one involved academics who met virtually. Co-teaching, which was only cited twice, involved diaspora academics and Africa-based scholars who were colleagues at the same institution. With respect to friendly review, which was mentioned 18 times, in eight cases it was performed to the benefit of Africa-based scholars by diaspora scholars who were their former supervisors; four times by diaspora scholars who were classmates of the former in graduate studies; five times by diaspora scholars who were colleagues that the Africa-based scholars met at a conference; and once by a diaspora scholar who was met virtually.

These results suggest that diaspora scholars' engagement in knowledge production in Africa is also partly determined by the strength of the ties they have built with colleagues appointed to African universities. The fact that some diaspora academics co-write and co-teach with, or offer friendly reviews to colleagues in Africa is evidence of the usefulness of embeddedness. It suggests that engaging in knowledge production in Africa requires that diaspora scholars build on previously meaningful relationships with Africa-based colleagues through whom they relate to the African higher education system.

Conclusion

Questions about the roles of the African academic diaspora in knowledge production in Africa appear to be at odds with pervasive talk of globalisation and the national unboundedness of scholars in the current century. At the same time, several other discourses point to the relevance of national or continental boundaries, and therefore to the legitimacy of asking such questions. Although African diaspora scholars have been socialised in a strong colonial-era ideological imperative, which values engagement in Africa, at the same time, they are integrated into a professional foreign academic institution with its own rules and high stakes. While these diaspora scholars are urged to serve in Africa, they are also expected to excel in their local institution and at the global academic level. Furthermore, the diaspora need to meet all these requirements in a specific historical context characterised by time constraints – a core resource for all academics that seek to make a difference in their profession. In order to engage in Africa, diaspora academics must choose and assume roles that are compatible with the expectations imposed by Western academia. These roles are hierarchised according to the amount of time required to perform them, and their effects on the diaspora scholars' professional career on the Western or global academic stage. For example, co-teaching classes and organising conferences in Africa imply substantial expenditure of time. Furthermore, their impact on the position of those who engage in them in the Western or global academic sphere is marginal in comparison with co-authoring an article or a book. Due to this inequality of effect, diaspora academics select the roles they are willing to assume. Those that are relatively time-consuming and less likely to enhance their local and global academic status are outnumbered by those that are time-consuming but have a positive impact on such status.

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