THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN REMEMBERING AND RE-MEMBERING AFRICAN MEMORY (IES) AMONG THE KENYAN IMMIGRANTS LIVING IN THE DIASPORA

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Abstract

The interconnectedness and interdependence of our world today (due to the expanding technological space) attest to the disappearing distinction between the local and the global. At a time when the global has invaded the local and the local has entered the global, there is need for constant engagement across cultures. With the ever-increasing numbers of immigrants from the developing world entering the developed countries, cultural and religious impact on the hosting as well as the sending nations are remarkable. Even, the remotest village in rural Africa is aware of the wider world beyond the confines of ethnic and village life because of the explosion in communication technology. In this paper, I will interrogate the impact of technology on the experiences of the African immigrants in the Diaspora and consequently their places of origin sending nations. My secondary aim is to understand the interconnectedness between technology, migration, religion, and culture. I will attempt to show the interconnection and correlation of Diasporic experience(s) within the wider discourses on human subject, economics, culture and religion. I hope to show that the use of technology and mainly the social media has rendered African immigrants' experiences ambivalent from the simultaneous attempt to reduce "otherness" as immigrants while still maintaining a cultural gap between themselves and host's culture. On the one hand, technology is used effectively to universalize reality and identity while on the other, the same is used effectively to maintain "otherness" meaning that the Diasporic Africans never lose touch with the African connection.

Keywords: Technology, Memory, African Immigrants, Diaspora

Introduction

Over the millennia, Africans have found themselves shaped by many experiences such as the slave trade, invasion by foreigners, colonization, de-culturalization, apartheid, the arrival of Islam, and Christianity. Indeed, some of these experiences have benefited and revolutionized the African way of life but others have caused enormous pain and suffering. This paper seeks to begin a conversation on how institutions of higher learning in the U.S. and in Kenya can link up with the Kenyan Diaspora in positive ways in order to enhance development. The paper highlights specific areas of research in which researchers may engage more appropriately. Before considering the specific areas of engagement, it is important to mention a few things that relate to our larger discussion.

Immigration to lands beyond Africa is a phenomenon that has impacted Africans in many ways. With the ever-increasing numbers of immigrants from the developing world entering the developed countries, cultural and religious impacts on the hosting as well as the sending nations are remarkable. Expanding technological space has also played a significance role in the interconnectedness and interdependence of our world today. The technological space has led to the disappearing distinction between the local and the global. Even, the remotest village in rural Africa is now aware of the wider world beyond the confines of ethnic and village life.

In Kenya, these remarkable changes are obvious with evidence showing that Kenya has greatly benefited from both immigration and technological phenomena. According to the Central Bank of Kenya in 2014 alone the Kenyan diaspora remittance (money sent by Kenyans living in foreign lands back to Kenya) increased by 18.6 per cent, from USD 107.5 million in September 2013 to USD 127.4 million in September 2014, slightly lower than USD 128.8 million recorded

in August 2014. The 12 month cumulative inflows through September 2014 increased by 12.6 per cent to USD 1,403 million from USD 1,246 million in September 2013. In the first half of 2015 remittance inflows to Kenya increased by 9.2 percent to USD 754 million from USD 690 million in the first half of 2014. By June 2015, remittance inflows had increased by 17.1 percent to USD 136 million compared to USD 116.1 million in June 2014 and increased by 5.3 percent when compared to inflows in May 2015(Central Bank of Kenya website). The Central Bank of Kenya categorically states that the increase was largely driven by flows from North America. In total, the 12 month cumulative remittances in June 2015 increased by 10 per cent to USD 1,492 million from USD 1,357 million in the year to June 2014. One wonders, if the Kenyan government has recognized diaspora remittances as an important contributor to the country's growth and development. Is not time that Kenyan universities and partners begin to think of how this new phenomenon can be tapped?

Another equally important factor to consider in this discussion is the fact many Africans have made USA their home whether through green cards, naturalization, or overstayed visas. According to RAD Diaspora Profile (Migration Policy Institute, undated), there are approximately 105,000 Kenyan living legally in the USA. Most of these immigrants live in Texas and California. In Los Angeles County alone, there is an estimated number of 2,400 legal Kenyan residents. The report also indicates that the Kenyan diaspora in the United States is highly educated, economically successful and has a labor force participation rate that far exceeds the USA national average. Most of these Kenyans hold more bachelor's as well as advanced degrees than the US population overall. Over a quarter of these Kenyans are in the nursing profession. In addition, the median annual income of the legal Kenyan diaspora households in

the United States is $11,000 above the US national median. The report also states that two in five of Kenyan immigrants are homeowners.

A preliminary survey shows that many Kenyans and East Africans living, in Southern California comprise of an unreligious majority. This group of immigrants (most of who are lured to the United States by its intellectual, economic and political diversity) brings forth cultural and missiological dimensions to the larger American Christianity. African immigrants seek to integrate African cultural and religious heritage into the diverse American society. This situation offers a great opportunity for both Christian missionary work among people living and working far from home.

For the researcher to appreciate the potential that lies in the new global development enumerated above, we need to consider the following questions: How has the diasporic experiences of the Kenyan immigrants in the USA helped in remembering or re-membering the African memory(ies)? How do the African immigrants interpret and re-inscribe the Diasporic imagined self while holding onto the values and ethos learned before immigrating? To what extent have the African immigrants employed cultural tools such as proverbs, poems and homilies, African theater in order to articulate their vision, contradictions and ambivalence of the Diaspora situation? How do they appropriate the re-membered memories in engaging the larger Global society? In which ways do the African immigrants stake their claim to the material sphere of the economy, statecraft, science and technology that we can tap into? In an attempt to answer these questions, I have proposed two broad spheres of investigation: (i) social memory and (ii)re-membering.

Social Memory: Remembering Africa

In the first instance, when people come to a new country, their shared heritage often make them feel strongly the need to come together as a social group with shared social as well as cultural identities. Africans are no exception. Research shows that, as immigrants in lands far away from home, Africans (like all other immigrants) tend to gravitate to their own people. The quest for the pulling-together seeks to satisfy spiritual, religious and cultural needs. This is because the migrants tend to forge a form of a love-hate relationship with the receiving country. On the one hand, African immigrants to such countries as the U.S. make tremendous strides in economic and education spaces. On the other hand, the act of immigration (though an act of will) has removed migrants from their roots. The "base" is in essence a place of power, comfort, knowledge and familiarity. Many in the diasporic community speak of a nostalgia, a longing for a space in which they can practice and exercise power. On its part, the hosting cultures tends to perpetuate cultural docility. The triumphant and sometimes humiliating host culture is symbolically (and powerfully) reinforced by popular culture, the media and other technological spaces. Consequently, the migrating Africans cannot help but remember their former base, Africa.[1]

In the process of assimilation which is in itself an attempt to self-identify with the American culture, the immigrant is equally confronted by a double-consciousness. On the one hand, the immigrant longs for home and does all that is within their power to hold close the memories of home. At the same time, they attempt to cut-off the "self" from the African social body in order to "fit in" the host culture. Sadly, the immigrant finds themselves dismembered from his social memory through the host's ideology, culture, and language. The dismemberment

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[1] i.e. remembering both in the notion of memory and bringing together [jointly].

of the memory is both from the individual and collective. This loss of social memory destroys or distorts the base (Africa) from which he/she comes. As a result, the wholeness of the African subject is fragmented. The immigrants have no choice but to submit to the memory of the hosting nation. The host gladly takes charge in naming and owning. To the immigrating African, the "American dream" becomes the coroner who embalms the decapitated self in preparation for the burial of the immigrants' decapitate memory of their former state. The American memory of place and space bury the native memory of place. Because of this death or amnesia of the collective memory, some Africans allow the American memory to become their new marker of identity. The immigrant begins to see his own people as enemies. He despises his accent, his language, his color of skin, and his culture. Furthermore, the technological space brings with it an exposure that is both disempowering and humiliating. Images from cities such as Ferguson, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles are not helpful either. Racism and unfriendly immigration laws add to the African further dismemberment from power. The immigrants become just but a cog in a capitalistic machine, producing without a say. They have no say in the host society but the state has power over every state of their being.

Re-membering:

The Diaspora story is however not a sad one because the immigrants have re-inscribed the self in the most forceful way using the very technology to deconstruct the most humiliating system. The immigrant attempts to resist the objectification and classification through re-membering. Through education some have attempted to change the subject and master narrative that has become the expression of the unequal relationship of power. With all its good intention, and sadly so, the education received has also created an African middle class in the U.S. who

partner with the host and perpetuate the loss of self which is commonly linked to the loss of memory. Notwithstanding the odds against them, the immigrant still claims the material space of the hosting society. They also assert and acquire the right to name and reclaim the identity lost.

Kenyan immigrants in the U.S., for example, have identified several technological sites of remembrance and empowerment. They use the vision of wholeness as a strategy of remembering the fragmented as they seek wholeness. When we interrogate the impact of technology on the experiences of the African immigrants of the diaspora and consequently the places of origin we begin to understand the interconnectedness between technology, migration, religion, and culture. Examples below attempt to show the interconnection and correlation of diasporic experience(s) within the wider discourses on human subject, economics, culture and religion. Using these specific examples, this paper shows that the use of technology and mainly the social media has equally rendered African immigrants' experiences ambivalent. The conflicting feelings come from the simultaneous attempt to reduce "otherness" as immigrants while still maintaining a cultural gap between themselves and host's culture. Technology is used effectively to universalize reality and identity. At another level, immigrants use technology to effectively maintain "otherness." In the end, the Diasporic Africans never lose touch with the African connection.

Another important observation is that immigrants' experience testifies to the diversity and differences present in the Diaspora world. Since the immigrants' context and cultures have their own agendas, priorities, and history, it is not possible to develop unitary and pure forms of experiences. The immigrant-self that evolves out of the diaspora situation cannot be anything but hybrid, mixed and impure. The immigrant-self is never total or complete, it remains perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable course, open to change and inscription. Individual

immigrants, in the end, interpret the diasporic reality without necessarily being pigeon-holed by any exclusionary, fixed, and binary notions of reality based on culture, race, ethnicity, gender or even national identity.

Due to the ambivalences and the hybrid nature of diasporic experiences, the diaspora situation offers an "in-between" space where other possibilities become feasible. This point is elaborated further by Bhabha (1994) who eloquently argued that the "'in between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha, 1994) The "in-between" space opens the possibility of negotiations. An interrogatory interstice is opened where cultural values, community interests and experiences are negotiated. The "liminal space" created, symbolizes interactions between the immigrants' worldviews and cultural encounters in the world of the diaspora. The technological spaces highlighted allow African immigrants to interpret the new spaces with relevant meanings of their own in dialogical encounters. Let us briefly consider some of these technological spaces.

Revolutionizing Technological Spaces

Money Transfers

Wave is a mobile-based money transfer application that is used to send money (just like a text message) from the U.S., UK, and Canada to any of the East African countries. The funds arrive instantly to the recipient's mobile money account in Kenya, Uganda or Tanzania. Wave charges no fees to send money but makes money on exchange rate and displays live price comparisons to competitors such as like Western Union and MoneyGram which make profit from both the exchange rates and the fees they charge. Wave has automated the entire money transfer process

building a sustainable business that helps save their customers $9 on every $100 transferred. Kenyans have transferred billions of shillings using this application. Others popular money transfer platforms include POAPAY (for large amounts of money).

The Linguistic Space

Kasisi Facing Mount Kenya is a Gĩkũyũ online database. This is a project which collects, preserves and make available valuable documents and materials created in the course of the historical development and doing business mainly conducted by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (P.C.E.A.) and other African churches in Kenya. The database offers a most thorough and extensive online database of the different aspect of the Christian Church in Kenya with the main focus on Presbyterian Church of East Africa. This online database aims at preserve history, encouraging research, and offering insights in matters of culture, religion, history and theology. The first part of the project is to offer an online collection of all known (and even extant) Gĩkũyũ and Swahili Christian hymns, songs, and choruses. The second aspect is to create an online Gĩkũyũ Bible which will include the two main Gĩkũyũ Bible translations (1965 and 2007 versions.) The third aspect of this project is a blog on the history of the Church in Gĩkũyũ-land with greater emphasis on Presbyterianism and African Independent Church. Its main purpose is to create an exhaustive Gĩkũyũ digital library that gives immigrants from Central Kenya the opportunity to read, research, and access information not made available by any other media.

The Media Space

Jambo Radio Network is a radio station that uses the telephone technology to connect Kenyans in the diaspora. By just calling a specific cell-phone number, you are immediately connected to listen, engage the present and engage other Kenyans in the Diaspora. The network is sustained by donations from Kenyans of goodwill as well as partners. We have other media outlets such

Mwakilishi, Ajabu Africa, Mister Seed, The Diaspora Messenger, Diaspora TV among others that equally serve the same need.

The Religious Space

Mũtambo International Prayer Ministry (MIPM) online is Prayer Ministry that combines prayers and Sunday worship. Prayers are held daily Monday to Friday where different people are assigned to lead on specific days each month. The focus is on families, the church of Jesus Christ, the nations, the sick and other personal needs[2]. Prayers and worship is done in English and Kikuyu. Another interesting aspect of MIPM is Baton - an intercessory arm of MIPM. Using Leviticus 6:13, "The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out" as the basis of this prayer line, intercessors are required to receive the "baton" and pass it on after specific time in prayers. Caregivers, long distance truck drivers among others have started their own versions of "mũtambo."

Higher Education

The Kenya University Project has been conceptualized by Kenyans in the diaspora to create a non-profit institution of higher learning in a well-planned university town. KUP is planned to house schools of Liberal Arts, Business, Engineering, and Technology. The planned institution will be located on a 2000-acre land in Taita Taveta. KUP's vision and goals aim at training students to become entrepreneurs. The training will be informed by the emerging global applications of economic, technology and environmental sustainability. KUP entrepreneurs also wish to create a vehicle for research on sustainable environment and better quality of life in Kenya and the world. Besides offering opportunities for higher education, KUP seeks to develop

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[2] To connect to Mũtambo Prayer Line, one calls a specific number (+1(857) 216 6700) and enters an access Code (993050.)

a university town which provides housing for students, business and employment opportunities for entrepreneurs.

African Immigrants' Experiences and the In-between Space

The specific examples mentioned above offer researchers the opportunity to interrogate the use of technology and social media and how such technologies have rendered African immigrants' experiences ambivalent. What is clear is that Kenyans living in the diaspora use technology to interpret the new spaces with relevant meanings of their own by creating an "in-between" space that hybridizes economics, culture and experience. As a result, the diaspora actualities have opened up the possibility of alternative way of encountering the diasporic space through technology. Technology, to some extent, has reduced the physical space enabling the African immigrants to articulate their vision, contradictions and ambivalence of the diaspora situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to show how Kenyan (and African) immigrants' ambivalence within the historical development of diasporic experiences and space helps create an "in-between" space that hybridized economics, culture and experience. The diaspora actualities open up the possibility of alternative way of encountering the diasporic space through technology. What remains to be seen is whether such encounters help in dismembering, remembering or re-membering the African memory(ies.) In addition, researchers need further understand how effectively technological spaces and contexts stand on the contested space between the diasporic interpretation of orthodox gnosis. How has the use of technology infused both African traditional and Western elements? How do the African immigrants deploy cultural

hybridity of their interstice conditions in order to translate, interpret and re-inscribe the diasporic imagined self? In the liminal space of diasporic encounter and social discrimination are we able to hear the silenced voices and make visible the diasporic invisibles?

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