

1. Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture
2. Volume 9 Number 1
3. © 2018 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/cjmc.9.1.91_1
4. _____
- 5.
- 6.

JON SILVERMAN
The University of Bedfordshire

Mediating identity: The West African diaspora, conflict and communication

ABSTRACT

Migration raises many existential problems, not least, questions of identity. Over time, migrants settle and form a diaspora in a new land but does dislocation from their geographical 'home' inevitably subvert their sense of self? Can representation through the diasporic media mitigate this loss? The African Union considers the diaspora the sixth region of Africa and the news media helps foster amongst West Africa an 'imagined diaspora' (Anderson), connecting them to their country of origin. In the social media age, this 'diaspora of the Internet' (Tettey) can be seen at work, often acting as a mirror for division and disharmony in the country of origin. Taking a case study approach of three countries in West Africa and interpreting conflict in its broadest senses, this article seeks to examine the ways in which the news-related media of the West African diaspora has influenced understandings of identity.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

Being African is an increasingly complex identity. As someone who has been told she is too black to be British, and too British to be African, I am strongly against the notion that identity can be policed by some external standard.

(Hirsch 2012)

The journalist and author, Afua Hirsch, has good reason to consider notions of identity and belonging. She was born in Britain to a black Ghanaian mother and white British father, whose own father was a Jewish exile from Nazi Germany. Those seeking to pigeon-hole might describe her as an 'Afropolitan', an African born in the diaspora or an African who identifies with both their African and European heritage. (There are various academic contestations of the term 'Afropolitan', which are beyond the remit of this article.)

Another commentator who straddled two cultures, the American-born James Baldwin, who found his unique voice in Paris during the 1950s, was far less nuanced in his analysis of racial identity: 'All you are ever told about being black in this country (the United States) is that it is a terrible thing to be' (Baldwin and Troupe 2014).

The reason for beginning this article with quotes about identity from two writers of different generations is to point up the transformation of the diasporic public sphere in the intervening decades. Baldwin's undoubted influence on American identity politics was shaped by his writing and public

1. resolution and peace building through access to donor agencies (Lyons 2004).
 2. On the other hand, Brinkerhoff sees the potential for diaspora communities
 3. to 'raise money to support continuing warfare, promote public opinion and
 4. interventions in support of their cause' (Brinkerhoff 2006: 27). While Anderson
 5. describes as 'long distance nationalism' the temptation of the disaffected
 6. diaspora member 'to play identity politics' in the conflicts of his homeland
 7. (Anderson 1992: 13).

8. Georgiou argues that it is time to move beyond such 'utopian/dystopian'
 9. distinctions (2013: 81), but this contested ground offers a useful frame in
 10. which to analyse the relationship of the media of the African diaspora to iden-
 11. tity formation. A helpful starting point in this quest is Palmer's definition of
 12. the modern African diaspora as consisting of:

13.
 14. ... the millions of peoples of African descent living in various socie-
 15. ties who are united by a past based significantly, but not exclusively, on
 16. 'racial' oppression and the struggles against it; and who [...] share an
 17. emotional bond with one another and with their ancestral continent;
 18. and who also, regardless of their location, face broadly similar problems
 19. in constructing and realizing themselves.

(Palmer 1998: 3)

20.
 21.
 22. However, this definition does not include that element of diaspora conscio-
 23. usness captured by Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community'. In other words,
 24. the element coming from within the perceptions of the community itself. 'It is
 25. *imagined* (original emphasis) because the members of even the smallest nation
 26. will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of
 27. them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson
 28. 1983: 49). It is an image fostered and magnified by media representation, in
 29. Oyeleye's words: 'helping to sustain diaspora formations and to enhance a
 30. sense of diaspora consciousness' (Oyeleye 2017: 29).

31. In his study of democracy in Africa, Nic Cheeseman writes that, although
 32. such pressures as elections inevitably aggravate tensions between communi-
 33. ties, 'the politics of belonging was not equally pronounced across the conti-
 34. nent [...] they (*sic*) were most pronounced in more diverse countries where
 35. governments had actively favoured some ethnic groups and discriminated
 36. against others' (Cheeseman 2015: 157).

37. Although generally sound, this formula does not hold for all African states.
 38. Rwanda is one of the least diverse countries in Africa, with a unitary language
 39. (Kinyarwanda) and only three tribal groups, Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Here, the
 40. construction of a mythic diaspora by Hutu supremacists and supported by
 41. government, was a necessary component of the decades of propaganda,
 42. which led ultimately to the genocide of 1994. The story that the Tutsi were a
 43. Nilotic people who migrated to central Africa and imposed a despotism over
 44. the indigenous Hutu and Twa was woven into the fabric of prejudice, which
 45. animated Radio Rwanda and the infamous private station, Radio Télévision
 46. Libre Des Mille Collines (Prunier 1995; Melvern 2000). Some might see an
 47. irony in the fact that it was the military force of a genuine diaspora, Rwandan
 48. exiles living in Uganda and Tanzania, which overthrew the Hutu regime and
 49. ended the genocide.

50. The unashamed partisanship and low ethical standards of much African-
 51. based media, whether on the side of government or opposition, one tribal
 52. group or another, are accepted as the facts of life in many parts of the

continent. In the case of Sierra Leone for example, the post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission observed that:

Some newspapers are in danger of becoming little more than scandal sheets, relying on proactive and, at times, dishonest headlines in order to promote sales.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report 2004: 80)

So, the research questions underpinning this article are these: when it comes to the lens trained on Africa by the media of the diaspora, does distance lend objectivity, even impartiality? Or is the freedom afforded by a home, however temporary, in another country or on another continent, 'conferring the privilege of being able to intervene in certain domestic debates without fear of retribution' (Wai 2012: 243), regarded as a safe space in which to fight identity battles with even more partiality?

Methodology

This is a qualitative study, taking an inductive approach, with the data derived from a small number of semi-structured interviews and a close reading/interpretation of secondary texts. The interviewees are media representatives whose country of origin is either Liberia, Sierra Leone or Nigeria and whose work has, in different ways, been shaped by the conflicts in that West African region, whether conflict defined as war or as internal political upheaval and ethnic contestation. They were asked to reflect principally on the issue of identity, interpreted flexibly in a number of different ways: attachment to and understanding of tribal/ethnic affiliation, political/party grouping and the interests of the nation and/or Africa as a continent. Some of the ground covered also embraces the various strands of relationship forged in the host country which, in the social media age, create what has been called 'the connected migrant' (Diminescu 2008).

The interview transcripts and the texts – news dispatches, opinion pieces, blogs and reports – were subjected to thematic analysis, drawing patterns of meaning from the discursive construction of media, conflict and identity, and seeking to elicit common themes in the three case studies. This is a small-scale inquiry done in a short time-scale, with the interviewees chosen only on the basis of freely available published material, so it makes no large claims about being representative of diaspora intervention in the three countries. As stated earlier, this is relatively an un-researched terrain so more extensive investigation is called for.

Data analysis

Sierra Leone

Dr Zubairu Wai (quoted above) is a Sierra Leonean scholar who migrated to Canada. His birth country was lacerated by a decade-long civil war in the 1990s and during that period, diaspora journalists and campaigners saw it as their responsibility to publicize in foreign policy circles the issues dividing their homeland. 'The media and internet became part of the diasporic communicative spaces and avenues for networking. These spaces helped the diaspora articulate certain views and opinions regarding the conflict, while allowing them to keep in touch with events back home' (Wai 2012: 234). As an example,

the Internet discussion forum, Leonenet, founded in 1991/2 at the start of the violence, helped demystify the origins and character of the rebel force, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) 'at a time when information about the conflict and the insurgents was limited and misleading at best' (Wai 2012: 34).

The online newsletter, Focus on Sierra Leone, published by Ambrose Ganda in the United Kingdom, where the largest expatriate Sierra Leonean community lived, not only carried regular updated news and opinion on the conflict but became a valuable conduit for advocacy and lobbying for a negotiated settlement after Ganda established contacts with the RUF. And following the 1997 coup, which overthrew the SLPP government and brought in the short-lived Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, two exiled Sierra Leoneans, who found refuge in neighbouring Guinea, set up a radio station, FM 98.1, as a diasporic mouthpiece for the ousted president, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah (Wai 2012: 235).

Wai believes that focusing on whether diasporas play a positive or negative role is a 'false binary that is both problematic and self-limiting' (Wai 2012: 209), but others, both inside and outside the media, take a different view. And some appear conflicted about their role. Sanpha Sesay, who blogs under the sobriquet, 'The Texas Chief' from Dallas, swapped a position as press attaché to the Secretary of State for Development and Economic Planning in Freetown for that of assistant editor-in-chief of the *Salone Monitor*. He left a devastated country behind when he sought asylum in the United States in 1999 and joined some 3000 Sierra Leoneans in the Dallas Metro area:

Journalism in the diaspora is about coming together. I see my main goal as promoting political and social change in Sierra Leone. The country is so divided into supporters of the two political parties [the governing All People's Party (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP)] that they are like two warring camps. I see my main goal as promoting political and social change in Sierra Leone. The country is so divided into supporters of the two political parties [the governing All People's Party (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP)] that they are like two warring camps. I see my main goal as promoting political and social change in Sierra Leone. The country is so divided into supporters of the two political parties [the governing All People's Party (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP)] that they are like two warring camps.

Sanpha Sesay's apparently contradictory views offer a revealing insight into what might be called Sierra Leone's 'identity crisis'. The term, 'ethno-regional divide', was used in the Introduction to this article and it requires some elucidation here. Like Liberia, modern (i.e. post-eighteenth century) Sierra Leone was shaped by the influx of former or freed slaves from the Americas and West Indian colonies. This cohort, known as Krios, settled in and around Freetown

Europe. She argues that this opened up a 'third humanitarian domain' (Horst et al. 2016) sending the same kind of assistance that the diaspora provided during the armed conflicts of the 1990s.

But she goes further, positing that the relief effort was an assertion of identity, in that it not only eased the burden on the government in Monrovia but 'also enabled Liberian diasporas to practise citizenship from afar, thereby expanding the spatial contours of the state and public authority "outside" (author's quotation marks) of its geographic ambit' (Pailey 2017: 665).

A similar 'expansion' took place during the years 2007–10, in a different context, when a small cohort of journalists from Liberia and Sierra Leone provided daily radio reports from The Hague on the war crimes trial of the former Liberian president, Charles Taylor. The journalists were natives of the countries they were broadcasting to but 'over the lifetime of the project became a temporary diaspora in the heart of Europe' (Silverman 2017: vii). One of the Liberian reporting team was Joseph Cheeseman, who lived through the Liberian conflict, which ended only in 2003. He reflects on the psychological difference brought by geographical separation from the homeland:

I felt I had a kind of dual identity when I was living and working in The Hague. Obviously I was from Africa, but I simply saw myself as part of an international press corps, as a journalist among equals, without any perception of being an African subject to the kind of ethno-political pressures we experience at home. Objectivity was always my watchword. However, at some points of the trial, when witnesses alleged that Taylor and others had indulged in cannibalism, I was greatly embarrassed, especially when a lady from the Democratic Republic of Congo, sitting near me in the press gallery expanding 6Ssurthe rpomhip frTpet,a001 Leone

means that these new platforms are inaccessible to the masses. Traditional media – particularly radio – therefore remain an important platform for public engagement. At election times, these kinds of legacy media formats are critical in enabling the public to make informed choices.

(Ogola 2017)

With the pace of technological change becoming ever faster, television probably counts as 'legacy media' for some, especially the young. But its influence should not be discounted. The Nigerian diaspora channel, BEN Television (BEN standing for Bright Entertainment Network), based in London, had an image of itself as an avatar of 'Afropolitanism' when it began broadcasting to audiences both in the host country and Nigeria in 2003. Nigerians make up the largest African diaspora in the United Kingdom. As the channel's own prospectus put it:

BEN television is a black-oriented, urban, diverse and cosmopolitan family channel introducing new, cultured programmes to European taste [...]. It also includes a range of cultured programming to empower, transform and challenge the conventional perception of Africa and Africans.

(BEN Television www.bentelevision.com 2007)

Nigerian media scholar, Abiodun Adeniyi, suggests that the prospectus held the promise that:

a new element in transnational communication is coming because the programmes are no longer going to be entirely African; neither are they going to be reproducing white, liberal Eurocentrism. [...] Through a consumption of BEN TV programmes therefore, the migrant may acquire a new worldview, one that is not entirely African.

(Adeniyi 2016: 54)

This vision speaks to diaspora media being a 'lateral' connecting factor for many second-generation diaspora Africans, linking them, not so much with people from the ancestral homeland, but with other black citizens of the country in which they live and the concerns that animate them, such as the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. But BEN TV's founder and chair, Alistair Soyode, explains that early aspiration has had to give way to financial reality:

When we started, we wanted to reach the black community in the United Kingdom as well as the African diaspora. But we do not have the money to put on ambitious original programming or hire our own reporters. And in any case, black British viewers would compare us with mainstream British television and find us wanting so we have had to fall back on unpaid 'community correspondents' and 'free' content from Africa's largest network, NTA (Nigerian Television Authority), which runs 100 stations all over Africa.

(Soyode 2017)

With more consistency than Sanpha Sesay in Texas, Soyode admits that his guiding philosophy is to present images of positivity about his home-

1. Girls', illustrates Tettey's 'diaspora of the Internet' in action. But like Sierra
 2. Leone and Liberia, albeit on a far larger canvas, Nigeria's geographical, ethnic
 3. and political divisions are as likely to be magnified by diaspora media inter-
 4. vention as healed by it.

5. The interviews indicate that, as the world shrinks through new media affor-
 6. dances, many diasporic occupants of the deterritorialized space are comfortable
 7. with a 'hyphenated' identity, having a foot in both camps as it were. Sanpha
 8. Sesay has lived and worked in Texas for nearly twenty years and acquired
 9. American citizenship in 2010. Does he see himself as an African American?:

10.
 11. I prefer the description, 'Sierra Leonean-American' because it distin-
 12. guishes us from those black people born in the United States.
 13. Unfortunately, on official forms, there is no box you can tick which iden-
 14. tifies you as 'Sierra Leonean American'. But as a 50-year-old, I identify
 15. with Africa in a way that young Sierra Leoneans living here do not.
 16. Many do not want to go there because of all the negative images they
 17. see on the media.

18. (Sesay 2017)

19.
 20. Understanding the dynamic relationship between diaspora media, conflict
 21. and identity involves an epistemological quest and many questions. Can we
 22. find any empirical measurements to assess changed identities over time in
 23. response both to relocation and media representation? How do we discover
 24. what role media has played in the mass movement of peoples from the
 25. African continent to Europe as distinct from the filtering back of experiences
 26. of other people from the same village or town? How do we judge at what
 27. point migrants become a diaspora?

28. One thing that can be said with some degree of confidence is that the
 29. African diaspora is now populating the online sphere in ever greater numbers,
 30. using Twitter and Facebook to influence the global debate about international
 31. development. It may not yet be true that the diaspora, through its media, is
 32. having the impact on elections and political change in Africa that it is having
 33. on development projects and advocacy, but that day may not be too far away.

34.

35.

36. REFERENCES

37. Adeniyi, A. (2016), 'The Media of Nigerian diaspora in Britain: A study of
 38. priorities and preferences', *New Media and Mass Communication*, 48:1, pp.
 39. 50–58.
 40. *African Courier* (2017), 'Nigerian diaspora to launch campaign for safe migra-
 41. tion in Lagos', [www.theafricancourier.de/migration/nigerian-diaspora-](http://www.theafricancourier.de/migration/nigerian-diaspora-to-launch-campaign-for-safe-migration-in-lagos/)
 42. [to-launch-campaign-for-safe-migration-in-lagos/](http://www.theafricancourier.de/migration/nigerian-diaspora-to-launch-campaign-for-safe-migration-in-lagos/). Accessed 29 October
 43. 2017.
 44. Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and*
 45. *Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.
 46. ——— (1992), 'The new world disorder', *New Left Review*, 1/193, May–June,
 47. [https://newleftreview.org/1/193/benedict-anderson-the-new-world-disor-](https://newleftreview.org/1/193/benedict-anderson-the-new-world-disorder)
 48. [der](https://newleftreview.org/1/193/benedict-anderson-the-new-world-disorder). Accessed 12 November 2017.
 49. Baldwin, J. and Troupe, Q. (2014), *James Baldwin: The Last Interview: And Other*
 50. *Conversations*, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing.
 51. BEN Television Prospectus (2007), www.bentelevision.com. Accessed 14
 52. October 2017.

- Bercovitch, J. (2007), 'A neglected relationship: Diasporas and conflict resolution', in H. Smith and P. Stares (eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peacemakers or Peace Wreckers*, Tokyo: UNU Press, pp. 17–38.
- Binneh-Kamara, Abou Bhakarr M. (2018), in person interview, London, 1 February.
- Brazil, J. and Mannur, A. (2003), 'Nation, migration and globalization: Points of contestation and diaspora studies', in J. Brazil and A. Mannur (eds), *Theorizing Diaspora: A Readers*,

- com/it-will-not-be-business-as-usual-bio-assures-diaspora/. Accessed 31 January 2018.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (2004), *Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission Vol II*, Freetown: Sierra Leone Truth Commission.
- Wai, Z. (2012), 'Conflict and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone: The role of the Sierra Leone diasporas', in T. Zack-Williams (ed.), *When the State Fails: Studies on Intervention in the Sierra Leone Civil War*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 203–46.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Silverman, J. (2018), 'Mediating identity: The West African diaspora, conflict and communication', *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 9:1, pp. 91–106, doi: 10.1386/cjmc.9.1.91_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jon Silverman is Professor of Media and Criminal Justice at the University of Bedfordshire and co-director of the Centre for International Media Analysis, Research and Consultancy (CIMARC). He is a former BBC Home Affairs Correspondent, 1989–2002 and before that, he was BBC Europe Reporter, based in Paris, 1987–89. He is an acknowledged authority on international and post-conflict justice, having covered the trials of Slobodan Milosevic and Charles Taylor in The Hague and reported from the ICTR in Arusha. His current research interest is the relationship between Africa and the International Criminal Court.

Contact: Media and Criminal Justice, the University of Bedfordshire, Luton Campus, Park Square Luton, Bedfordshire LU1 3JU, UK.
E-mail: jon.silverman@beds.ac.uk

Jon Silverman has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
submitted to Intellect Ltd.
