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ABSTRACT

"Africans in the Diaspora" refers to peoples of African origin dispersed throughout South America, the Caribbean, and North America as a result of the Atlantic slave trade carried out by European nations from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. The paper first provides an historical overview of the Diaspora. It then discusses the "Children's Readers on Africa Series," books that introduce young African American children to their cultural heritage. The Series depicts aspects of African culture through language, folklore, rhymes, songs, games, and proverbs. The Series focuses on Nigeria and its languages, not only because it is the most populous African nation but also because there are perhaps more persons of Nigerian origin in the United States than of any other African nation. The paper briefly discusses the geographical location, history, and culture of the following Nigerian peoples: Efik/Ibibio, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The Series aims to give the children of Africa and the African Diaspora the beginnings of a collective value system of sharing and working together in harmony and peace. (BT)

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION OF
THE AFRICAN CHILD IN THE
DIASPORA - THE MISSING LINK**

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Early Childhood Education of the African Child in the Diaspora - The Missing Link

Introduction

This presentation and many others that will follow are in response to numerous requests from our people of Africa and African descent who now find themselves scattered throughout the world and who the events of history have alienated from their traditional roots. There has been a missing link. From the basic to the complex aspects of life and living, a lot is missing. Our people are now interested in reviving our culture, our literature, our folklore and other related oral traditions, games, songs, and dances.

Our approach is to start with the young by acquainting the African child in the diaspora with the fun things associated with growing up in every African community.

We intend, on a very long term basis, to contact and connect with as many communities of Africans in the

diaspora as possible. All persons of African descent should see the need to be involved in all activities - big or small, that help revive our culture. Language, including European languages, spoken by our children, should not be a barrier.

The first volume in the series entitled "Children's Readers on Africa", starts with Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Efik and Ibibio and is translated into English, French and Spanish with musical tunes on tape to guide and facilitate instruction. Others in the series will have other African languages and translations in the same European languages.

Before we examine some aspects of the book itself, let us together review the problems facing all of us and our children as Africans and Africans in the diaspora.

The word "diaspora" was originally used to describe Jewish communities living outside modern Israel, especially those dispersed among the Gentiles after the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites. Nowadays, it is applied to the dispersal of an originally homogeneous people. "Africans in the Diaspora" refers to peoples of African origin dispersed in South America, the Caribbean,

and North America as a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade carried out by the European nations from the 17th - 19th centuries. During this period, Europeans captured or bought Africans - men, women, and children, and carried them across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas where they were sold to white plantation farmers. It has been estimated that the Trans-Atlantic slave Trade from all over West and Central Africa averaged some four to five million enslaved Africans in its worst century, of whom one-third were Igbos.¹ Their descendants today are freemen and nationals of American countries such as Canada, the U.S.A., the Caribbean countries, Brazil, etc. During these centuries, they were cut off from their cultural roots, and knew next to nothing about the countries of their origin. They were made to embrace the cultures of their masters - mainly European culture. Many were converted to Christianity, but in a few communities in Brazil, Haiti, etc.; they preserved part of their culture in language, music, dance, crafts, and folklore. Since Alex Haley's book *Roots* was published (1976) and

¹Fage, J.D. "Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Context of West African History." *Journal of African History* X,3, 1969.

serialized on TV - there has been a revival of interest in their African heritage by African-Americans. Just as adopted persons who do not know their biological parents are, they set out on a quest to find them and feel empty unless they achieve this objective, so many Africans of the diaspora attempt to carve a cultural link between them and their African heritage. Unless they do this, they do not know who they really are, especially as they live in a predominantly white environment, where their color marks them out as distinct.

Apart from the original African communities in the diaspora, there has been an increase in the number of Africans coming to the Americas, especially, the U.S.A., in recent times. Their children are born here and become U.S. citizens. They may themselves naturalize. If care is not taken to introduce their children to some aspects of their cultural heritage, they will grow up alienated from their roots. This is the main objective of "Children's Readers on Africa Series". The series introduces children through language, folklore, rhymes, songs, games, proverbs and adages to various aspects of African culture, which form

part of their education. The focus on Nigeria and a few of its ethnic groups is deliberate. Not only is Nigeria the most populous African country (over 100 million), but also there are perhaps more persons of Nigerian origin in the United States than any other African country. The Nigerian languages used in the series - Efik/Ibibio, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, are, combined, spoken by more than fifty percent of the population of Nigeria. The translation into English, French, and Spanish will make them available to the entire population of the Americas, except in the Portuguese speaking countries of the Caribbean and South America, where, English and Spanish may also be spoken.

It can be seen that we have tried to capture the linguistic atmosphere in the African communities in the Diaspora.

We shall now briefly discuss the geographical location, history and culture of the Nigerian peoples mentioned in this text, in alphabetical order. First, the Efik-Ibibio. This Nigerian ethnic group, is the second largest, after the Igbos, who live in Southeastern Nigeria. They occupy the present states of Akwa-Ibom and Cross River,

and are usually divided into the Efik, Ibibio, and Anang, according to language variations (dialects). Contemporary Ibibio tell of an original dispersion from a place called Ibom, after wars with their Igbo-Arochukwu neighbors, to an area extending from Aro on the north, to Ika in the west and Oron in the south. Their original occupations are agriculture, fishing and trading. In recent years petroleum has been discovered in the area, and they now are the third largest oil producing area in Nigeria. They have a strong socio-political organization, including age-grades, council of elders (Mbong Isong), presided over by an Obong Isong, and the Ekpo title society council, which was originally a war council, later developed into a judicial council, wielding enormous influence and authority.

The Efik-Ibibio are well known for their traditional dances, pre-marriage fattening-room practices, and special foods such as vegetable soups and cocoa-nut rice which have become nationally and internationally accepted recipes. During the days of the Atlantic Slave Trade, many Efik-Ibibio were carried to the West Indies, like their Igbo neighbors. However, because of the large number of Igbos,

the European slave traders regarded all those from the Southeast as Igbos.

Their kinsman the Annang, excel in wood carving. Ekpo society masks, slit gongs, puppets and dolls are made out of hard and soft woods. Weaving is generally done by youths and matting by women; baskets, fishing traps and pottery are also made, also pottery. They also produce statuettes and paintings of people and animals. The Oron are noted for ancestral figures carved from hardwood, three to four feet high. Their style is unique, the most distinctive feature being a long painted beard, carved as growing from the point of the chin. In religion, most Efik-Ibibios are Christians, but some still practice traditional religion.

The Hausa

The Hausa, who mainly live in Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, and Nassarawa, states in Northern Nigeria are perhaps the best known ethnic/linguistic group in West Africa, indeed in all Africa. Kano will be celebrating 1000 years of its history in the year 2000. The Hausa language is spoken throughout West Africa. They and the Fulani

constitute the ruling elite throughout West Africa; practically dictating who is or is not to rule the country. In religion, they are predominately Moslems, although there are some Christians and traditional religionists among them. Perhaps the most important event in the history of the Hausa was their conquest by the Fulani, during the Jihad (Holy War) under the leadership of Usman Dan Fodio in the early nineteenth century. But Hausa culture prevailed over Fulani culture, especially linguistically. Kano, the emporium of the Hausa states dominated the history of the Western Sudan. Its famous wall and four gates still exist.

The *Kano Chronicles* and the *Legend of Daura* record the legend of origins of the Hausa.² The Hausa do not feature very much in the Atlantic Slave Trade. However, they feature very much in the Trans-Sahara Slave Trade as slave dealers and slaves in response to the Islamic demands for slaves for the harems. Thus there was another “Diaspora” of Africans in the Islamic-Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East. There are many

² Nwosu, S.N., “Oral Tradition and History.” *Nsukka Historian*

Nigerians of Hausa origin living in the Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, etc. who are either descendants of those enslaved, or of pilgrims who failed to return after performing the Haji (pilgrimage) to Mecca. The Hausa were organized into seven original states - The Hausa Bokwai - Kano, Katsina, Gobir, Rano, Daura, Biram, and Zaria, and seven other non-Hausa states - the Banza-Bokwai - Kebbi, Zamfara, Gwari, Jukun, Yoruba, Nupe, and Yauri. By the middle of the 14th century AD, the first period which saw the rise of the Hausa States may be said to have ended. The most remarkable event that happened in Hausaland during the second half of the 14th century was the introduction of Islam.

The organization into states introduced kingships, organized governments, hierarchies and bureaucracies, and the coming of Islam brought organized religion, with this as the basis of a socio-political-economic polity. Islam is a syncretism; a way of life. Thus the religious leaders came to dominate politics, government, laws, economics, and all aspects of social life.

Traditionally, the Hausa are farmers and great merchants. As farmers, they supply the country with most of its grain - millet, guinea corn, maize, rice, beans, and root crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, onions, etc. Their Fulani neighbors rear cattle, and the transportation and trade are mainly in the hands of Hausas, who are found all over the country with cattle. The Hausas are great craftsmen and women, producing elaborate carvings on calabash and wood. They trade in perfumes, carpets and even in exotic items. They have a rich cultural heritage in music and dancing.

The Igbo

The Igbo inhabit the central part of South Eastern Nigeria. Their traditional homeland is in the present states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. They also form a large part of the populations of Delta and River States. They did not develop states or kingdoms as their Hausa and Yoruba counterparts, but a highly intricate system of rule based on consensus and individual worth. It is probably in its civil and libertarian traditions that Igbo

culture excels most of the other cultures in Nigeria. Its source lies in the associated traditions of government, properly so-called “government by consensus” - a more democratic system than any “democracy by representations” invented by the Western world. Age grades are well defined with appropriate functions, and in recent times these age grades have been responsible for developments in education, infrastructure (roads, electricity, water supply), commerce and industry.

The Igbos are one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, the others being the Hausa/Fulani and the Yoruba, and the political game was played among these groups for many years, and their influence is still evident today. As mentioned earlier, about one-third of those carried away from West Africa to the Americas during the hey-day of the slave trade were Igbo.

The Yoruba

The Yoruba live predominately in Western Nigeria, Ilorin in Northern Nigeria, in the following states: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Osun, Kwara, and Ekiti. They developed

centralized forms of government, with clearly defined hierarchical systems and roles, checks, and balances. They claim that they are descended from a common ancestor - Oduduwa, who made Ile-Ife his religious capital. They founded the kingdom of Old Oyo which has a great cultural, political, economic, and religious influence over much of Yorubaland. Between the 16th and 18th centuries Old Oyo spread its conquest to the R. Niger in the North, Dahomey (now in the Republic of Benin) in the Southwest and bordered on the boundary of the Benin Empire in the East. Its wars provided many of the slaves that were transported across the Atlantic from Badagry and Porto Novo. Thus you have large Yoruba communities in Brazil and the West Indies. The ties between the Yoruba and Brazil are still strong today. Many of the early houses in Lagos were of Brazilian architecture.

The Yoruba are the most organized and culturally rich ethnic group in Nigeria. They have always wielded enormous economic and political influence in Nigeria, as a result of early exposure to European influence, especially in the nineteenth century. Although most Yoruba are today

Christians or Moslems, quite a large number still practice their traditional religion, and the Ifa priest still practices his craft. Some Africans of Yoruba origin in the diaspora still practice aspects of Yoruba religion, with local variations.

Yorubas are great craftsmen and women. Their dance, music, and drums are internationally recognized and have been incorporated into the music and dance of the Caribbean and South America. Their traditional attire is admired all over the world and has become the most recognized traditional dress of Nigeria. They are also great merchants, especially the women, who can be seen all over South-Western Nigeria plying their trade. Cloth making and dying have been the traditional occupations of Yoruba women. In addition they are great farmers in food and export crops such as Cocoa and Kola nuts.

Conclusion

One of the manifestations of the interest of Africans of the "diaspora" in their cultural roots was the holding of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos Nigeria, 15 Jan. - 12 Feb. 1977. During

this month long event, participants from all over the world unraveled the rich cultural heritage of Africa in all aspects of human endeavors - Literature, The Arts-painting, sculpture, music, dance, drama; the Sciences and technology, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, and education. In the papers presented at the symposium on The Sub-Theme: Black Civilization and Pedagogy, many speakers emphasized the need for curriculum reform in the school to reflect the rich cultural heritage of Africa. The schools had been transmitting the Western European Christian culture of the colonial masters. In the process of this acculturation, African traditional systems of education, with their collective value orientation (as exemplified in this series) were gradually but perceptively giving way to the Western (Christian) system, with its emphasis on individualistic value orientation. What we are doing in this series, is to give the children of Africa and the African diaspora the beginnings of an education that is founded on the fundamental tenets of a collective value system - sharing and working together in harmony and peace.

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