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**Sociological Study of the African  
Diaspora**

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## **Sociological Study of the African Diaspora**

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### **Abstract**

There is an abundant amount of contemporary literature that discusses the idea of «diaspora» but such discussions usually are lodged within political and economic realities confronted by any migrating national and/or ethnic groupings. There also is literature that uses the language of diaspora and explores particular populations as examples of the phenomenon. However, there is much less literature that rigorously explores the definition of diaspora and how it does or does not differ from the idea of migration. Similarly, little if any literature examines theoretical propositions concerning the African Diaspora as put forth by sociologist Ruth Simms Hamilton. This paper engages Hamilton's four theoretical propositions as a useful typology and emphasis is on characteristics of the African Diaspora as a distinct global phenomenon. The hope is that such a systematic discussion can benefit the discipline of sociology as the plethora of usages of diaspora language has almost rendered it ineffective as a concept for thorough academic explorations.

**Keywords:**

**Corresponding Author:**

## **Introduction**

I begin by giving thanks to all those who've gone before and made it possible for me to be at this time and place. I wish to thank, as well, all those involved in organizing this annual conference. I have been following these proceedings for some time but this is the first occasion wherein I could participate. Thank you! I also deeply appreciate members of the African Atlantic Research Team and express my gratitude to each of them for their time, energy, and support in all of my activities.

Today I wish to share clarifications and recommendations about propositional statements for studying the African Diaspora as put forth by sociologist Ruth Simms Hamilton. I base this relationship on the contention that common heritage, coupled with shared historical conditions and situations during much of the last four hundred year, help to form significant identity components of African descendants throughout the globe, no matter their current geographic or national locations. I chose to focus on clarifications of the African Diaspora because I'm certain our discipline can benefit from Hamilton's clear theoretical thinking!

This paper identifies Hamilton's four propositions and explores characteristics that represent the generalized realities of African descendants as a distinct, global, social formation that differs from other diasporic populations. I give attention to Hamilton's conception of the African Diaspora as product of a global collection of social forces, factors, and history in order to bring attention to her theoretical ideas for studying the phenomenon. I equally posit that Hamilton's ideas need much more conceptual attention and research, especially by sociologists.

## ***RATIONALE***

In recent years, there has been a great variety of use in the language of diaspora. Consider, for example, that as of May 2013 some 42,597 *Journal Storage* (JSTOR) citations were noted to have used the term. The variety in usage of the "diaspora" idea is equally numerous (Armstrong, 1976; Baumann, 2000; Carter, 2005). Such volume and variety of discourse tends to render the diaspora idea of little or no purpose as foundation for rigorous research. As one author proclaims, "the abundant use went hand in hand with the term's semantic *dissolution*" (Baumann, 2000: 314 my emphasis).

Companion to this overabundance, is a general assumption that any transnational migration by any group, particularly large numbers of persons from a national base of heritage, equals a diaspora. I disagree with such broad and inclusive denotation in the process of conceptual framing of this particular human phenomenon as it thwarts our ability for thorough research and theorizing. I contend that we need to give stronger attention to the definition of diaspora as a separate concept, the African Diaspora in the specific, and become particularly conscientious in using both. It is true that *every diaspora*

*involves transnational migration, but not all transnational migration equals a diaspora.* Nowhere is this made clearer than in the case of the African Diaspora, even as academic arenas have become aware that our contemporary globalized world, initiated some five centuries ago, has materialized into its current manifestations with advancements in expeditious development of wireless and digital technology that facilitates rapid global communication by a large number of people.

### **GENERALIZED DIASPORA**

While Ruth Hamilton's propositions for studying the African Diaspora are specific to those descendants and that phenomenon, her articulations sit squarely within existing literature concerning theoretical understandings about the general diaspora concept. This is true despite John Armstrong's application of the concept "to any ethnic collectivity which lacks a territorial base within a given polity" (1976:393 quoted in Baumann, 2000: 313). William Safran also devoted early consideration of diaspora but he asserts that the global disbursement and importation of Africans and their descendants does not belong within conceptualizations of diaspora, at least not within his ideas about diaspora (1991: 84, 90).

Safran's was incorrect of course and fortunately, sociologist Robin Cohen's full-length discussion in *Global Diasporas Second Edition* (2008) serves to correct most of Safran's earlier limitations. Cohen argues that diaspora studies have gone through four phases; pre-1980s' classical phase, the 1980s to the mid-1990s phase, the mid-1990s phase, and the turn of the 21st century forward as phase four (1-2). He then proceeds to attach these rather arbitrary time demarcations for studies of diaspora to nine common features of a diaspora and his five "ideal types" of the phenomenon (15-19). In a bit of what I call intellectual 'slight of hand,' Cohen vaguely combines the four phases with labels of the ideal types and divides his remaining seven book chapters accordingly. For my consideration of the African Diaspora, Cohen's discussion of diaspora's common features, and his descriptive categories appropriately positions the African Diaspora as a first in modern times, even though he does not articulate it as such.

Cohen's delineation of diaspora common features and his proposition of diaspora "ideal types" are important tools for use in systematic research and theorizing about the phenomenon. Similarly, he also discusses concrete examples of several cultural communities within their appropriate categories and features for how they do or do not adhere to the specifications (Chapters 2-7). These rather more expansive yet specific considerations that include the African Diaspora, overlap with Hamilton's ideas about African articulations of this particular type of human movement throughout the globe.

***THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS***

***African Diaspora Visible:*** The general idea of diaspora, or the *massive* involuntary and semi-involuntary transnational movement of a people from their lands of heritage, is not new to academic or colloquial discourse (Anonymous, 1885; Levitt, 2003). However, the use of diaspora as related to African descendants' "routes of passage" does not enter academic circles until the October 1965 International Congress of African Historians held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (Shepperson, 1993: 41). This gathering led to the theme of the African Diaspora appearing in the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's multivolume *General History of Africa* (Ogot, 1992 and 1999; Harris, 1993:4).

Ruth Hamilton knew of the developing considerations about the African Diaspora and regularly used the Kiswahili word of "*maafa*" in reference to the global phenomenon. The African synonym describes the idea of "a major event or even series of events causing great suffering, misfortune, upheaval, or trauma" for a human cultural community; a disruption that becomes part of the community's historic memory (Hamilton 2007:4). The/*A maafa* becomes a community's definitive marker, an identifier around which is placed, communities build, part of their collective sense of self.<sup>1</sup>

From the 1980s until her tragic death in 2003, Hamilton and the historian Joseph E. Harris exchanged ideas about their explorations concerning the African Diaspora. Harris was contemplating a multiplicity of historical details related to centuries of exorbitant suffering, tribulations, upheavals, and traumatic life experienced by Africans and their descendants transported from their heritage lands to locations throughout the globe, particularly to the Americas. Harris defined the African Diaspora in the following manner:

*...the African Diaspora resulted from unique historical developments, namely, the global slave trades conducted for centuries primarily by Arabs and Europeans, and the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 that partitioned Africa and set boundaries that continue to divide ethnic groups and inspire irredentism (2007:86).*

This definition is logical, historically accurate, theoretically sound, and positions the African phenomenon within the larger global context that constructed it as a social formation. Yet Harris' definition also separates the African Diaspora from activities, events, and results that belong to imposed transnational migrations of other human populations. The African phenomenon

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Hamilton shared the word and idea during a seminar discussion of African Diaspora in which there was at least one African student. She credits her former ADRP graduate student, Maria Pease for introducing the word into the diaspora lexicon. Personal conversation between Ruth Simms Hamilton and the African Atlantic Research Team, Graduate Seminar on Women & Religion in the African Atlantic. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, November 4, 2003.



is not applicable to Chinese, Indian, Armenian, Greek, Palestinians, or other diaspora occurrences, for example.

The forced captivity and transnational movement of massive numbers of Africans as human cargo was some five centuries long and occurred through international migratory streams of transportation and trade. Over time, the streams of transit and trade became defined, re-defined, and engrained as organized formal patterns of transnational movement. The international patterns included internal local, regional, and national routes and together both global and internal categories of transit were used repeatedly to move cargo from known centers of successful trade and economy (Wallerstein, 2011). The dynamic internal -- regional and local patterns of movement, coupled with similarly vigorous yet formalized transnational global migratory streams in which they functioned, caused social and political shifts among indigenous and imported population groups in new and old locations throughout the world (Harris 1982:36).

As the involuntary transportation of captive Africans was outlawed late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and European powers divided the African continent into colonies for their imperial economic benefit, the global system of transportation, trade, and transnational migration continued. The earlier involuntary out-migration of Africans from their continental home already had launched a series of socio-political and economic activities that established the shifting Africans and their descendants into post-colonial, post-enslavement patterns that are our contemporary realities; the African Diaspora continued (Thompson 1987).

Definitional clarity delineated by historical continuity is but a single aspect in discerning concepts with theoretical implications. Ruth Hamilton was guided by Harris' historical articulations and centered her research on acquiring evidence that would help develop interlocking ideas for directing the theoretical study of the African Diaspora. She formed the African Diaspora Research Project at Michigan State University in 1987 and guided graduate students' research in identifying *historical* and *empirical* evidence (Dodson, 2010). She was no longer interested in merely chronicling the dispersal of African people and/or describing their migration processes within episodic situations or time periods. Hamilton was concerned with enunciating a set of "sensitizing concepts that help make sense of empirical findings" (Wuthnow 2003: 22). She articulated a typology, a set of theoretical propositions that categorized social phenomenon and are appropriate for studying the African Diaspora. The remainder of this paper will discuss Hamilton's propositions.

***The Four Propositions:*** Hamilton contends that beyond the descriptive nature of the definition, there are four circumscribing conditions that identify the African Diaspora. The conditions have evolved within and from the initiating, involuntarily, and semi-involuntarily processes imposed by external forces that for more than four centuries displaced massive numbers of captive Africans from their homelands. Those processes, though altered and adjusted to new times and global realities, continue as distinguishing and defining characteristics in the lives of Africans and their descendants, in all

their geographic locations. In speaking about the defining characteristics, Hamilton states that Africans and their descendants throughout the globe consistently have been subjected to conditions of:

- *Migration and Geo-Social Displacement: The Circulatoriness Phenomenon,*
- *African Diaspora Connections: Myths and Realities of Homeland Relations,*
- *Power, Domination, Inequality: Structurations of Black Dispossession,*
- *Agents of Resistance: Diasporic Identities and Communities of Consciousness.*

These are propositional statements based on years of historical and empirical research conducted in a variety of global locations: Costa Rica, Panama, Dominican Republic, India, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, the United States, Canada, Germany, and many others (2007). Time and space does not allow me to exam each of the propositions but I refer those who are interested to Hamilton's *Routes of Passages Rethinking the African Diaspora, Parts 1 & 2, Volume 1* (2007).

Even as I subscribe to and conduct my work by way of Hamilton's typology, I would posit at least two issues for consideration to her original thinking about the African Diaspora as historical, ongoing, and as social condition. The first recommendation is to divide the African Diaspora into historical and contemporary phenomena that are demarcated by a shift in its characteristics, a shift that occurs at the 20<sup>th</sup> century decade of the 1950s and 60s. This was the time period, the historical moment when many previous African colonies achieved independence from European control. The change brought a shift in movement characteristic of the African Diaspora that initially had been distinguished by involuntary, transnational migration of aggregated groups of Africans. With national independence, transnational migration became semi-involuntary movement by individuals African nationals. The transnational out-migration after the 1950s and 60s was the semi-involuntary movement of Nigerians, Ghanaians, Malians, Sierra Leoneans, or other nationals from the continent of Africa.

Transnational migration was no longer an involuntary or forced dispersal of aggregate groups of Africans and their descendants but was movement of individuals, or small groups of individuals, from specific nations. These individuals now migrated across national borders to locations throughout the globe but within semi-involuntary "push and pull" phenomena associated with global economic, political, and/or environmental issues. For example, Africans were *pushed* from their countries by violent change in home governments, depressed local and national economies, military campaigns that pitted one ethnic group against another, egregious natural disasters, and/or famine. They also were *pulled* away from their national locations by other, more developed nations' changes in immigration policies, or multi-national business lures of economic opportunity in other locations.

It must be noted that forces that continue to push and pull African nationals into global migration patterns also affect African descendants located outside of the continent and already part of the African Diaspora. I propose that the vehicles that brought about out-migration of contemporary – post 1960s, African nationals are a changed yet continuation of well-established external global forces and movement patterns begun some four hundred years earlier.

The contemporary change in the dynamics of transnational movement of African nationals leads many researchers to assume that current migration, including related social phenomena associated with the movement, is **not** part of earlier patterns associated with the African Diaspora. Based on grounding in Hamilton's propositional typology and evidence from my own studying of the African Diaspora, I do not accept such episodic assessments, even as this tends to be the approach for many, particularly sociologists who consider modern-day relocation and settlement patterns of African descended people (????). The contemporary assessments are inclined to be ahistorical and not consider African and African descendant populations' fullest contextual perspective regarding their transnational migration. Perhaps such ahistorical treatments of continental descendants' current migrations are linked to sentiments about a post-racial world where global movement can allow individuals to attempt to avoid racialized social exclusions that regularly accompany the migrations (21<sup>st</sup> century; Dodson, 2011).

One of Hamilton's major characteristic of the African Diaspora is that its members are in "migration and *geo-social displacement*." Conceptually, this encompasses the reality that since their diaspora began some five centuries ago, the lives of African descendants have been in perpetual states of movement; transnational, regional relocations. Migration and geo-social displacement is the characteristic, not merely a passing attribute for most African descendants. Currently, we can attend national identity to those who emigrate from the African continent and other locations, but their movement remains part of the push and pull phenomena of global economic and political forces.

Equally important is that the migratory routes that modern-day African descendant individuals join follow the same patterns stimulated by economic, political, and social positioning of earlier involuntary movements of their predecessors. The historic global institutions that structured and pre-determined routes of passage continue and guide contemporary movement. It is my position that researchers, particularly sociologists, need a more long-term, *longue durée* approach to considerations about recent trends of African and African descendants' transnational movement, even as we need to probe the historic migrations within the conceptual framework of the African Diaspora. Such discussions of specifications of the geo-circularity will further distinguish the process character of the African Diaspora.

At the same time, I make a second extension to Hamilton's propositions that the African Diaspora also is characterized by a socio-political condition; albeit a condition that can be overlooked given the myriad and complexity of social circumstances that African descendants share with many other human groups. The pivotal question is, how is it that even after some five centuries of

migration and resettlement in new locations, coupled with multiple generations of laborious struggles to achieve successful social integration into new national societies, African and African descendants as a group continue to experience disproportionate political and social inequality, no matter their geographic location (Fierce, 2007; Solorzano, 2000)?

Ruth Hamilton discusses this continuing condition of inequality within her proposition of *oppression, domination, and subordination* that circumscribe normative realities of African and African descendants ( ). Of course, there are individuals, and small pockets of individuals whose lives do not overtly reflect domination and/or visible oppression but this is generally not true for most African descendant persons (Dodson, 2011). One would think that after some four centuries of struggle and accomplishments against oppression, domination, and subordination, the contemporary social position of African descendants collectively would bear no resemblance to their historic societal situations. It is not true for the majority of African and African descendants across the globe do not share in the benefits of industrial or technological development and profits ([transafrica.org/people-of-african-descent/](http://transafrica.org/people-of-african-descent/), Accessed June 2013).

The complex and elaborate global ideology of Euro-centric superiority, in all of its manifestations, has been transmitted as racial hierarchy and internationally rationalized to ensure distribution of privilege, position, and resources to those phenotypically of white-skin European descent or to those who appear to be close to that icon. Most African descendants do not adhere to the criteria. The reality of racism and racialization that affects them are intricate complexities of social structures inherited from earlier historical periods and they continue to produce stratified realities for Black, African descendants, as well as other people of color (Omni & Winant, 1994; Winant, 2004; 2011; Martinez HoSang, 2012). Ruth Hamilton's propositional linkage of oppression with race and racism does not exclude the compounded significance that gender and class distinctions impose on the racism experienced by individuals within the African Diaspora. As she says, "in addition to being the first modern diaspora, African peoples for the most part constitute an oppressed racialized class subject in a world context" (2007: 28). The important point is that patterns of racism, gender, and class discrimination intersect to continue to create conditions of oppression, domination, and subordination for the majority of African descendants throughout the globe. These conditions must be examined within the realities of the African Diaspora and with much more rigor.

I conclude this attenuated discussion of Hamilton's typology for studying the African Diaspora, not because it is impossible to continue but because neither time nor space allow me to engage a more encompassing clarification. I do recapitulate my original purpose in discussing Hamilton's work by stating that Ruth Sims Hamilton's propositions form a theoretical approach for critical examination of the African Diaspora as a significant global phenomenon. Thus far, sociologists have not led the way in examining it but, if we are truly to comprehend the first diaspora of the modern era, and I propose we must for the sake of all humankind, we need

take-up the challenge of better comprehending the African Diaspora as an historic and contemporary social formation.

Thank You!

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