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**ETHNICITY, CITIZENSHIP AND IDENTITY
FORMATION: CAMEROONIAN DIASPORA AS
ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENTAL AGENTS
TO AFRICA**

BY

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Abstract:

This paper titled seeks to explain Africans in the Diaspora as a distinct group with a purpose. The paper further explains their vision of citizenship and identity formation, and assumed that these were the main ingredients for statehood and belonging to a people. Without the gaining of their citizenship and identity, it would have been difficult to uphold the economic and political basis for alternative development and strategic planning for Africa. The paper x-rays the African mission in the Diaspora in terms of higher education and Policy Studies along multi-disciplines, which became the main ingredients they gained from the Diaspora to transfer and industrialise the African continent; to re-build Africa's administration and politics, democracy, economics, financial institutions, education, public health and other alternative developmental strategies which could help in the good running process in Africa if respected. Here, it argued that their long stay in the Diasporic world, along multi-ethnic groups propagated their ethnicity,

hence, a cry for belonging. The paper recommends some valuable alternative strategies for development, which if implemented could lead to a way forward for the growth of Africa in general and Cameroons in particular.

Keywords: Cameroon, Citizenship, Development, Diaspora, Economy, Ethnicity, Identity.

Introduction:

The growing economic and political sphere of the African continent has always been the focus of everyday lesson in conferences, symposia's, seminars, debates and many colloquia's in world's gathering. Africa's changing image position with constant migratory movements to the outside world (The making of the Diaspora) has always been an issue that affects countries of origin and their various social, economic, political and even religious structures. Historically, the slave trade and slavery activities that forcefully up-rooted Africans from their original abode contributed to the development of the social structures of the western hemisphere; in economics, politics, education and other technological knowhow.

The backwardness of Africa's economic, political and social development, has given a fillips for the younger and professional Africans to "forcefully" migrate to the Diaspora for a better economic, political, social and educational fulfilment. The destinations of these African migrants are mainly the United States of America, Canada, some European and Caribbean States and presently, some African States with well-defined economy and prospective democracy; depending on the choice of each individual.

With bad governance in Africa, i.e. bad leadership, poor managerial skills and corrupt practices of African leaders and politicians, migration keeps on occurring increasingly on a massive scale in respective countries. It must be appreciated that, these migrants have been the back-bone and life-wire not only to their

respective families in the homeland; but contributes to the developmental processes and growth in their respective countries.

Substantially, Africans in the Diaspora mainly in the Western Hemisphere (United States, Canada, Europe and some Caribbean States) have always and continuously been the agents of alternative developments not only in their respective families, but to their home countries and (governments) in the areas of politics, economics, policy making and other significant developmental strategies. Leadership by most African home governments always reject their ideas; especially when they call on “democracy and change”

This example has actually been revolving all over the African Continent then and now. The cases of North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya) are good examples. It is happening in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Togo, Congo DRC, Congo Brazzaville, and the Sudan etc ... while the case of the Republic of Cameroon becomes a glaring example; being neglected both by the home government and the international community/ Organization to re-examine the demands and needs of the people and to apply the varying ingredients needed as exemplary necessities from what they inherited from other Western Democracies.

Hence, this paper therefore, focuses its attention on the difficulties inherited by the Africans in Diaspora as alternative developmental agents; despite their cloudy situation on their struggle for ethnicity, citizenship and a “New” identity formation. Their broad scope and experience across the Atlantic through western education and political civilization which they inherited to transfer to their homeland is being ignored and neglected for a better Cameroon/Africa if actually re-examined.

Conceptual Issues or Clarification of Ethnicity and Citizenship: The Struggle for Integration and the Dilemmas of Belonging.

The term “ethnicity” as used by some scholars means “the character or quality of an ethnic group”; “the condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group; Ethnic pride”. It has become a term susceptible to varying meanings. Nowhere is this more apparent than

the extent to which ethnicity has become the foundation of the reinterpretation of the American experience. Africans in the Diaspora (the Americas) went through these ordeals to meet up with the problems of ethnicity, citizenship and the struggle for integration; amidst the dilemmas of belonging especially in the American society.

While in the Diaspora, cohesive ethnic communities provided the social, economic, and political environments within which new arrivals of immigrants began the process of integrating into the larger American society. For the first generation immigrants, these ethnic communities provided a transitional environment in which familiar norms were sustained. An infrastructure of businesses designed to meet their everyday needs created an economic mobility that was independent of the host society. At this point in time, Africans/Cameroonians who found themselves here were mainly interested in integrating themselves and belonging; for this would give them the bases of recognition in a new community. Their main option was to choose menial jobs, to keep the momentum of their search for a better opportunity.

In many former ethnic urban enclaves in Diasporic communities, mainly where Cameroonians (Africans) found themselves; they carried out search on economic activities and other businesses which survived and continued to cater to their relatives along those who called them from home for permanent assistance (remittances). This process is an ongoing phenomenon where those at home (Africa) rely and depend more on their relatives from the Diaspora for survival.

Another powerful anchor for these settlements was the sprawling industrial factories that provided immigrants with employment. But the diversity of their origins proved a formidable obstacle to worker organization. Hence; there was a need for a political follow-up through the struggle for integration and belonging... even if the belongingness was attained, it was full with dilemmas and uncertainty surrounding Africans (Cameroonians) image and survival skills.

Citizenship: Citizenship on the other hand, “refers to the status of being a citizen, usually determined by law”. In relation to this study; precisely with focus on the American experience, the republican tradition, the qualities of citizenship are associated with particular rights and duties of citizens and a commitment to equality between citizens are compatible with considerable exclusivity in the qualifying conditions. For example, classical republics excluded slaves, women, and certain classes of workmen from citizenship. In general, qualifications for citizenship reflect a view about which persons are able to contribute to, or enjoy the benefits of, the common good or the freedom of the city.

The Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia defines citizenship as “Relationship between an individual and a state in which the individual owes allegiance to that state, and in turn is entitled to its protection. In general, full political rights, including the right to vote and to uphold public office, are predicated on citizenship. Citizenship entails obligations, usually including allegiance, payment of taxes, and military service. Citizenship may normally be gained by birth within a certain territory, descent from a parent who is a citizen, marriage to citizen, or naturalization”.

While in the Diaspora, (The United States) the 14th Amendment to the constitution defines citizenship in the United States as follows:

“All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction. These off, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside”.

Another reflection on the concept of citizenship was at the heart of the constitution. When Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence in 1776:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are

created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of governed.”

Jefferson argued that citizens were autonomous beings whose individual needs had value, and he said that governments that interfered with the fulfilment of those needs- “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” were tyrannical and unjust. By all “men” he meant every human being.

Following the above, the struggle for integration and the dilemmas of belonging became the strongest determinant factor for Africans in the Diaspora. This situation has dragged for decades, with lots of controversy. What Jefferson said was never put into practice ... things went worst for the Diasporic Africans in the early years with strings still connected to the present.

To gain or obtain citizenship that will impact on the Africans, it was a long and winding journey. An examination on a historic aspect on it could be recalled in 1857, when the Supreme Court heard the appeal of the case of Dred Scott, a slave who had filed suit claiming that when his master took him to a free state; while in that state he should be a free man because that state forbade slavery.

The court ruled that “negroes of African race” whose ancestors were “imported into this country, sold and held as slaves were not people”. As the word was used in the constitution, they could not have citizenship and therefore they did not have even the right to file a lawsuit in the first place.

This ruling actually contradicted the idea of “states rights” as it was understood at the time. But the decision was a political one, not a constitutional one, and was intended to avoid the potential for civil strife between free states and slave citizenship as a means for the states. In this perspective, the American environment was a very difficult one for Diasporic Africans in the struggle for citizenship and belonging; since the tumbling dilemmas historically, have been a blockade for the idea of citizenship which was supposed to be the basis of the African desires for a take-off in the American dream.

President Abraham Lincoln brought to office a view of citizenship born out of his upbringing in the frontier. He saw citizenship as a means for even the poorest Americans to seek redress of wrongs and to have access to education and other sources of social mobility. He summarized this in his Gettysburg Address, in which he said the government of the United States was “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” It was his view that the government had no legitimacy beyond what the people gave it, yet in “for the people” he meant that the government was obliged to actively help its people in attaining their civil rights.

His supporters in Congress were called the “Radical Republicans” because they wanted to reshape America's institutions to reflect fully the sovereignty of the individual human being. To them “people” applied to every human being. At this juncture, the realisation on the aspects on citizenship and the American dream amongst the Africans in the early period started gaining momentum. The position Lincoln had and took for the African was so symbolic that the notion of ethnicity and citizenship and the necessity of belonging became a hope and reality with the dilemmas gradually fading away.

Diasporas (Immigrants), Image Making and Identity Formation

Despite the long and difficult road to acquire the American dream due to the strings of discrimination, the migratory wave into the Diasporic world was still geometrical in its progression. Africans are still determined to break the ice and meet up with the desired conditions necessary in a formation of a “New Identity”. Hence, with the attainment of citizenship status and a socio-cultural balance; formulating their image in an American fashion with ethnic qualities, their identity became an alternative and a spring-board or the gateway for developmental strategies for the African continent and their individual home countries.

It must be made to understand here that, the intriguing aspect of ethnicity, citizenship, and the notion of belonging, was the extent to which immigrants made their socio-cultural, economic and

political status; a primary dimension of their identity. The process was reinforced after emancipation and the end of Jim Crow Laws, when Africans had the liberty to create their own institutions. During the same period, over a million Africans arrived the Diasporic World (USA) who did not accept the superiority of assimilation. Where ever settled, ethnic communities intent upon preserving their culture, traditions, and language appeared.

Being integrated in the western society (America, Britain, Germany etc) with a “New Identity formation”, the Pressure to restrict immigration was balanced by Americas need for labour. Economic growth and immigration complemented each other. Being “unaccredited ambassadors” to their respective communities and home governments, they obviously became the gateway for alternative developmental strategies for Africa; through their respective home governments. The African (immigrants) also stratified the working class along ethnic lines; with full citizenship status and completely transformed into the American society, along the devastating conditions in the homeland; they started inviting their relatives in America for a purpose of nation building back to Africa.

The purpose and focus for their ambitions were being put into realities. The Western economy then (1960s, 1970s, and 1980s) was very impressive and meaningful; that impacted the livelihood on Africans who took the option for “menial” jobs in the areas in which they found themselves. They were also committed to their solidarity with the homeland. Memories from their homeland are often associated with the sentimental values attached to during migration from their homeland to another country. Whereas the vision, any myth can be dissociated from the memory of their homeland; and it can also be promoted by other members of the Diaspora. The vision and myth may also be passed onto other members of the Diaspora or may be as a result of interactions and experiences among the Diaspora in the host country.

As bridge and a gate-way for development in their respective home countries, Diasporas seek, and is often eager to maintain or restore links to their homeland through active participation such as

inviting relatives or guests from the homeland to the host country. For example in the United States, the Cameroonian Diaspora has invited cultural actors (musicians, and film stars) and other entertainers/social groups who usually gives them that nostalgia for home and the image about their heritage.

The Diaspora also sends remittances to the homeland; thus contributing towards increasing the levels of welfare and investment. In addition, the Diaspora maintains consciousness, which could be economic, socio-cultural or political. However, in this case, the Cameroonian Diasporas level of participation is more dominant in the economic sector rather than comprehensive. Indeed, these characteristics according to Gillespie and others distinguished the Diaspora from, for instance, expatriates who assimilates the culture and language in host countries. Accordingly, the Diaspora may not readily necessarily assimilate the cultures in their host country. The eccentricity has made it difficult for the Diaspora to actively participate in the formulation policy.

As the newest arrivals (immigrants) tended disproportionately to gravitate toward the lowest kinds of employment, the experience repeated itself as subsequent arrivals propelled earlier upward economically. Continuing immigration had the further ironic effect of transforming previous arrivals (immigrants) into citizens and making a new identity formation. The sheer numbers, who immigrated to America between 1960 and 1990, were staggering some 37 million. Their overwhelmingly African origin was overshadowed by their diversity of language, religion, mores, customs, and culture. Departures from the old country did not end immigrant's interest in the affairs of their homelands. For many, the United States provided a base from which to mount efforts to overturn the old order at home.

Overtime, as the sources of immigration shifted, the children and grandchildren of earlier arrivals (immigrants) gradually assimilated into the dominant culture, and the seemingly monolithic solitary of ethnic communities eroded. The emphasis on endogamous relations deteriorated as marriage across ethnic lines

became the norm. The vast majority of Americans were increasingly of mixed ethnicity. The pre-eminence of the English language confirmed Anglo conformity. A new idea, the “melting pot”, emerged, which viewed Anglo dominance as a transitory stage to a new American identity fused from races, religion, and nationalities. But less evident was the stubborn retention of the unique characteristics of the seemingly submerged ethnicities. A cultural pluralism steadily permeated the homogeneous values that immigrants insisted were essential to the American identity.

In a global re-examination, as ethnics dispersed; hyphenated societies proliferated. Ethnics had assimilated, and now have a new identity formation... but they retained networks that advanced their political and socio-economic interests. Immigrants from Africa and Asia encountered a different reception than Europeans.

It must be accepted here that, the gaining of citizenship status and the formation of a new identity; became the gateway for Africans in the Diaspora starts realising their vision in industrialising the African continent.

Diaspora Collaboration and Empowerment in the Development of Africa: A Neglected theme from the Cameroonian Angle.

Diaspora collaboration and empowerment have been mainly in the social, political, religious and economic sectors in rebuilding and the industrialization of the African continent. Their collaboration is realised in their accepted interest to bring their initiatives together and to empower their homeland; significantly enough through Western education. Scholarship schemes are initiated and awarded to deserving pupil/students.

Most financial institutions (Credit Unions and other micro financial institutions) are owned or sponsored and initiated by Africans in the Diaspora. Here, they proposed loan schemes with limited interest rates so that interested business persons can better-off their businesses as desired. These ventures have been of much benefit from the Cameroon public than the “cut-throat” high interest rates modelled from mostly government owned commercial banks in

Cameroon.

In administration especially in the field of politics, good governance in democracy; Diasporic Africans have always played significant roles in their respective home countries. Here, it is mostly realised that, the home governments usually welcome their financial collaboration and empowerment in the homeland; but when it relates to the politics, administration and issues of good democratic governance for change, African governments will not listen the least to their Diaspora. They instead term their ideas of change as a challenge and criticism. Hence, killing the spirit and aspirations of the people and it is from this point that Diaspora begins to lose faith, determination and anxiety in the developmental strategies for Africa. The case of the Republic of Cameroon has been in this position for a very long time now.

Despite the potential and the interests by the Diaspora and various organizations, a number of factors act as barriers; preventing the African Diaspora especially from the Cameroonian angle in collaborating, empowering and participating in their different roles that are expected from them. These are from two fronts; Domestic and Diaspora.

- 1) Institutional racism, prejudice and discrimination, including distortions in the media. These are particularly dehumanizing and against the principles of human rights and as a result contribute to decrease their Diaspora communities' confidence and affect the plight of the Diaspora at the work place and the broader society. The consequence is low participation in the recipient country and thus limited access to resources that could be transmitted as remittances.
- 2) Lack of organizational unity among the Diaspora people themselves. This makes it difficult to unite and to act on a single front. This is particularly severe between people in different countries and regions. The case of the African Diaspora in the United Kingdom (UK) and the rest of Europe

is a glaring example.

- 3) Diasporas organizations face multiple disadvantages that prevent them from competing fairly with well established US/UK/EU/Canadian /etc institutions and International NGOs and private enterprises in assessing funding opportunities. This is because of the lack of support from home governments for various reasons ranging from political to greed.
- 4) Lack of political and institutional space and opportunities, to engage with US/UK/EU/Canadian/etc governments and international institutions. The various diplomatic missions in these countries/regions often play very divisionist politics against continental development.
- 5) Often Diaspora communities are involved in the jobs that Western communities do not want to take, which can increase their confidence and motivation to engage in international development activities or to access to the labour market that responds to their experience and qualifications. This most often results in lost of personal confidence, self-esteem and consequently low morale.
- 6) The problem of poor governance tops development constraints in Africa. The lack of political will and commitment by government agents is facilitated by the prevalence of poor governance. This has equally created a bureaucracy that retards everything. Private sector participation in the economy has not been facilitated by these delays.

Studies undertaken in Cameroon and other African countries (Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, and Senegal) explained how an investor takes at least two years to get authorisation from the government to undertake an investment activity; this is complicated by rent seeking imperatives by the various government officers. This therefore discourages gigantic

investment projects initiated by interested partners; mostly from western industrialised nations (Germany, France, Britain and the United States).

Industrial Free Zones established during the early 1990s are yet to have any impact on the productive sectors; since most of the investors are yet to get authorisation after so many years. More complicating is lack of institutions leading to confusion and wasting of time. Such incoherencies reflect the absence of a well thought out industrial development policy which should normally provide a comprehensive policy framework for private participation in investments.

- 7) Some members of the African Diaspora who may want to do business with Africa are often discouraged by the less favourable investment climates created by political and economic conditions in their home countries. These conditions are characterised by non respect of laws, fraud, bribery and corruption, outright theft, insecurity, etc. These are created by unfavourable policy options adopted by African governments and the refusal to accept changes. The fragile nature of African democracy is a case in point here. Put together, these factors make Africa more like a jungle where anything goes. Conditions of this nature are uncondusive to the type of investments that can bring meaningful change.
- 8) Conflicts and wars have been a major threat to Diaspora participation in the continent. These range from inter-tribal wars within countries to boundary problems between countries and problems of genocides that have become recurrent in the continent. Where there is no outright war, conflicts have made it impossible for investors to achieve anything like their full production potentials.
- 9) Inter and Intra regional co-operation in Africa have not been encouraging in the past. Existing evidence show that, African countries continue to depend on colonial ties which tend to

focus on cooperation between former colonies and the colonial powers to the detriment of regional co-operation. As a result, most African countries trade mostly with European countries whereas intra-African trade is only marginal. These limit the markets for a majority of African products like bananas in which some countries have supply potentials.

- 10) Poor state of infrastructural development in the continent also acts as a barrier to significant Diaspora participation in development. At all levels of infrastructure, Africa lacks behind the world average.

Conclusion:

It must be appreciated here that, the African Diaspora plays a very wide and varied role in promoting alternative developmental strategies and social advancement in Africa, covering different areas and involving different strategies and social networks. The African Diaspora now occupies an indispensable strategic position that links Africa with the rest of the world. Their presence in the West places them in a better position to impact positively on the overall development in Africa. From overseas they are able to supply and transmit many benefits to Africa. The benefits that Africa now gains from its Diaspora in the rich West and elsewhere are not restricted to the remittance transfers that have become the lifeline to any of Africa's poor.

Africa Diaspora also helps set up private (voluntary) development projects as well as start-up local businesses. In addition to all these benefits, the African Diaspora transfers valuable intellectual resources and new political ideas which are profoundly reshaping the political dispensation on the continent. They also transfer new technological ideas and valuable practical experiences that could improve the effectiveness of doing business in Africa. Moreover, the African Diaspora; because of their strategic position forge links with established humanitarian, political, economic and business networks in the West that brings benefits to those in Africa

lacking access to such influential networks overseas.

Unfortunately and despite all the above noted advantages, African Diaspora still operate on the margins of the host societies because of the weak social, economic and political position in which they find themselves in their new homeland. Furthermore, in the donor world both governmental and non-governmental mainstream agencies, the invaluable efforts of the African Diaspora do not count when it comes to development policy and practice regarding Africa. Similarly, their views and intellectual input to development strategies are neither sought nor appreciated.

Recommendations

- 1) The Diaspora must be recognized as stakeholders, communicate with each other, coordinate activities and work strategically with partners on specific and relevant projects both existing and the creation of new ones.
- 2) The Diaspora must be integrated into the policy making circles in various African countries and their effective participation in governance. Voting in the Diaspora during various main elections should be a right. Dual nationality for the African Diaspora should be an item in the next coming AU parliament.
- 3) Projects facilitating Diaspora engagement should be identified, developed and implemented. The UN, NEPAD, the African Union, African governments and host countries must invest in such programs to facilitate Diaspora engagement in continental development.
- 4) The opening up of a Ministry of Diaspora in each African country or departments in the foreign ministries that are particularly for Diaspora related issues. These ministries should be manned by technocrats in Diaspora issues. Governments should adopt issues of migration as part of development policy.
- 5) Conditions and incentives should be created at home.

- Promoting a climate that fosters dialogue, celebrates success, builds confidence and creates momentum.
- 6) Proposing that stakeholders in Africa's development recognise the impact of remittances transferred by African Diaspora on pro-poor finance, poverty alleviation and emergency aid in Africa. Remittances are fast, reach the poor directly, are therefore an effective means of relief and rehabilitation and provide benefits to many people at the bottom of society.
- 7) Establish a database for African Diaspora Organization and they should make an inventory of their development projects in Africa, and create a central Diaspora database.
- 8) The African Diaspora should profit from the possibilities and windows of opportunity offered by global networks. This is an indispensable human agency for channelling wealth, information, innovative ideas, intellectual capacities, skills and creative business practices from the West to Africa.
- 9) Short or long term re-migration of Diaspora Africans as an important means to inject skills and experience into Africa. Re-migration also provides a way out of unemployment for many skilled Africans living in the Diaspora.
- 10) The creation of an independent think tank with full participation of knowledgeable African Diaspora experts that would help steer a road map based on positive examples, achievements and best practices upon which alternative positions, strategies and policies regarding Africa can be formulated that would lead to better future results.

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