

Strangers and diasporas in Lusaka

By Oliver Bakewell

It was fifty years ago that George Shepperson, speaking at the International Congress of African History at the University of Dar es Salaam, adopted the term 'diaspora' to compare the dispersal of Africans, caused by slavery and imperialism, with the scattering of the Jews. For Shepperson, this diaspora included not only those transported as slaves across the Indian and Atlantic oceans but also those forced to move to other parts of Africa, whether as slaves, labourers, or those displaced by imperial enterprises such as plantation farming.

Since then, the idea of the African diaspora has expanded to encompass a vast array of different African populations that have spread across the world through migration, not just those forced from their homes by slavery or exploitation, but also those who move in search of new opportunities and a better life. There is great interest in how these different diasporas – whether from Nigeria, Somalia, Mali or any other part of Africa – relate to their country of origin. In particular, can they contribute to economic and social change through their continued involvement, often through personal contacts and sending remittances to family and friends, but also through business investments, the transfer of knowledge and expertise and the support for democratic change? In recognition of their potential contribution many African governments have established special departments or even ministries to work with their diasporas, keeping close contact and encouraging their involvement in the 'homeland'. There have been innumerable conferences, workshops and seminars about engaging African diasporas in development. The African Union has

gone as far as referring to the African Diaspora as the ‘sixth region’ of the continent (alongside Northern, Eastern, Western, Southern and Central Africa). However, almost all of this attention is focused on ‘people of African origin living outside the continent’.

But what happens to those Africans who move within the continent? For example, do Nigerians who move to Zambia stay connected to a Nigerian community in the same ways as we see among the Nigerian population in London? Are they sending money and other support to family members at home? Are they making investments in Nigeria? And what about their children – is their Nigerian identity reproduced through the generations? Or is the maintenance of their Nigerian heritage less prevalent compared to those who live outside Africa?

These are the questions behind the ‘African diasporas within Africa project’, part of the ODP. It has been exploring the settlement of people from West Africa and the Horn of Africa in two distant cities – Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, and Kampala, the capital of Uganda. Through interviews with migrants and their families, the project is showing the different approaches adopted by these groups to establish their place in these two cities and the extent to which they seek to maintain their identification with the homeland and its people.

When it comes to West Africans in Lusaka, there have been small but distinctive populations of Nigerians and Malians in the city since the 1980s. The first puzzle is what brought these people to settle so far from home – the equivalent of moving from Nigeria to Spain, or from Mali to Scotland. The first Nigerians came as doctors, nurses and teachers, invited by the Zambian government through a scheme to boost the quality of public services in the late 1980s. When the scheme ended in 1990 with the change of government in Zambia, some returned to Nigeria but others stayed on, either to continue working in the public sector or to establish new businesses. Although most retain close connections with Nigeria, many of this group have become an integral part of the middle class in Lusaka, only distinguished from Zambians by their accents and names. However, they continually find themselves subject to wearying discrimination from Zambians, stirred by the popular stereotype of Nigerians as hustlers and crooks that means they constantly have to prove their

honesty and industry and can never feel they fully belong.

By contrast the Malians in Zambia are marked out by religion, language and dress from the Zambians among whom they live. The first migrants also came to the country in the 1980s, but far from being invited by the government, they came to trade Zambian emeralds on the black market. They were often arrested and liable to deportation; one man described how he pretended to be from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo so he could avoid being sent all the way back to Mali. Today, they have regularised their position and no longer face this harassment.

The vast majority of migrants from Mali have been men, mostly Soninke people. In contrast to the Nigerians, they appear much more concerned with preserving their culture and religion in Zambia. Most have married Zambian women, who convert to Islam and adopt many aspects of Soninke culture. Although many live in a small Malian quarter in Lusaka, centred on a mosque and Islamic school, they are intimately linked with wider Zambian life through their in-laws. Despite these ties in Zambia, many of the fathers send their children 'back' to Mali to be brought up as Soninke by relatives in their home area. However, there is evidence of mothers resisting such moves and being able to keep at least some of their children in Lusaka. The Soninke heritage is on much more shaky ground in this second generation, with some of the children even converting to Christianity, bringing much shame on their fathers in the Malian community.

These two brief examples show how the extent to which diasporic connections are sustained depends on a range of factors. First, there are the different intentions of the populations. While some Nigerians wanted to pass on their traditions and culture, others were much more ambivalent, expressing little concern about their children becoming Zambian. For Malians, preserving the culture was given very high priority and fathers were prepared to go to great lengths to achieve it. Second, there are factors arising from specific conditions in which people settle. Despite the efforts of Malian fathers to preserve their heritage among their children in Lusaka, they can be thwarted by their Zambian families. Only in time will it be possible to see what is preserved of their West African origins among the children who leave their father's religion. In contrast, and ironically, the middle-

class Nigerians who have less interest in preserving difference through the generations are continually reminded of their status as outsiders by the petty discriminations built on a lurid stereotype.

It not yet clear how these processes of settlement will play out over time. However, the emerging findings do challenge any idea that people necessarily want to, or are able to, sustain and reproduce links with the homeland. Rather than simply assuming that African populations outside the continent form diasporas, we must start by asking why and how they may do so in any particular context. □