



Migration,
Diasporas and
Citizenship

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA POPULATION IN BRITAIN

Migrant Identities and Experiences

Peter J. Aspinall
Martha J. Chinouya



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*To my mother, for her innumerable kindnesses, and to Şenay
for her interest (PJA)
To my father, Aaron, Pasi Chinouya (MJC)*

INTRODUCTION

For a number of reasons it is timely to write a book on the Black African population in Britain. The 2011 Census revealed that the Black African population had grown to 1.0 million people, making it the largest Black ethnic group in the country and substantially larger than the Black Caribbean (0.6 million) and Other Black (0.3 million) ethnic groups. Moreover, with the release of nearly all tables from the 2011 Census, this has furnished the authors with a rich repository of data to provide a socio-demographic profile of the Black African group that will remain a key source of evidence until the first releases from the 2021 Census in mid-2023. Further, 2015 marks the beginning of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent and the African Union has declared the diaspora the sixth region of Africa. The African Union has also called for the diaspora to engage in Africa's 10-year Science and Technology Programme endorsed in 2014. It is therefore appropriate to celebrate these events in this way.

The main focus of this book is the population now generally known as 'Black African', with a few exceptions where a wider capture is justified. This term has been used in the three decennial censuses of 1991, 2001, and 2011 and is now salient across central and local government and other statutory bodies. Members of this ethnic group have also coalesced around this term as a satisfactory self-descriptor. The term captures those with African ancestral origins who either self-identify or are identified by others as Black African, but excluding those residents of Africa who are of European or South Asian ancestry and people of North African ancestry. It refers to people and their offspring with these African ancestral origins

who migrated *directly* from sub-Saharan Africa (Agyemang et al., 2005; Bhopal 2004). It thus excludes ‘Black Caribbeans’ (another census category, sometimes referred to as ‘African Caribbeans’ or ‘Afro-Caribbeans’) who are defined as people with African ancestral origins who migrated via the Caribbean.

There are other terms for the ‘Black African’ population, such as ‘African (origin)’ and ‘African British’, but all, including ‘Black African’, are contested and most are technically ambiguous or problematic. The book engages with these debates. Some oppose the term ‘Black African’ as the use of the word black invokes the category of race, though cognitive research amongst community members indicates that the term is acceptable and does not cause offence. Attempts have been made to promote ‘African British’ but these have attracted only limited interest and the term is ambiguous with respect to specific origins in Africa. ‘African (origin)’, sometimes used as a synonym for ‘Black African’, as in the title of this book, also lacks specificity. Moreover, the term ‘sub-Saharan Africa’, widely used by international organisations, continues to be regarded as Eurocentric and racist.

The book’s title also invokes the concept of ‘diaspora’. The concept has traditionally been conceived in terms of a ‘catastrophic’ (Cohen 2008) and involuntary dispersion from a homeland in Africa associated with slavery. The new definition of diasporas has been widened to encompass recent and contemporary African migrations in pursuit of work, education, and asylum from civil strife and diasporas located in countries outside Africa and their interactions with processes of globalisations and associations with the broader concept of transnational communities. This focus on diasporas is particularly appropriate in the case of the predominantly migrant Black African population. The concept as used here focuses on the dispersion or the widely spread situation of a particular migrant group, the circumstances of these diasporic groups or communities, on recent flows of people across spaces and on their transnational activities. This shift in terminology in the 1980s and 1990s—from traditional approaches to *international* migration, invoking unidirectional flows and concepts such as ‘assimilation’ into the host culture, to diaspora studies on *transnational* experiences and communities—reflects growing interest in processes of globalisation as a sociological theme.

Developments in technology, notably the availability of cheap airfares across a widening network of routes and of electronic communications (electronic mail, Skype, the World Wide Web, satellite television, and

methods of money transfer), have all made it possible for these scattered communities to develop and sustain their own particular genres of diasporic identities, economic types, and lifestyles. Accordingly, ‘the rigid territorial nationalism that defines modern nation-states has in this way been replaced by a series of shifting and contested boundaries’ (Scott and Marshall 2005). These are explored, for example, in the book’s discussions on groups, categories, and national and transnational identities, that focus on the complexity, multidimensionality, fluidity, and diversity of diaspora identities.

It is within these broad debates and frameworks that such themes as population change, migration, the labour market, housing, health and social care, education, and social, cultural, and civic life are discussed. In the final chapter, attempts are made to draw out policy-relevant findings. Wherever possible we have tried to accord importance to the substantial heterogeneity concealed in the ‘Black African’ collectivity, though this has largely been limited to the different migrant communities or country of origin groups. The concealment of such contrasting groups as Somalis and Congolese on the one hand and Nigerians and Ghanaians on the other is one of the most important impediments to understanding the Black African diaspora. It is hoped that our analysis will add to evidence-based arguments for more finely granulated categorisation in the decennial census and surveys and to our understanding of the lives and diverse cultures of Black Africans in Britain.