The African Diaspora in Britain
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It is perhaps unusual to present a lecture of this type by focusing on personal experience, but I am one of the consequences of the hidden history that I will speak about. When I was young and at school there was no Black History Month. In fact, when I started my research into this subject over forty years ago there was still no Black History Month. The history of Africa, as well as the history of all the African diaspora in Britain – what today some people call 'Black British History' certainly existed but was largely hidden from view. I might add that the existence of BHM, which showcases such history for only one month is merely a recognition that for the other eleven months it is largely hidden. It is a symptom of the problem of Eurocentrism that still faces us rather than a cure. I decided at a young age that I wished to uncover that hidden history not just for my own enlightenment but also for the enlightenment of others. It did not seem right to me then, and does not seem right to me now, that my family, my ancestors, Africans and those of African descent in general, should be excluded from history, nor on the periphery of history. In the last forty years some progress has been made but, as has become even more apparent during the course of this year, there is still a long way to go.

I have deliberately chosen to entitle my lecture the African diaspora in Britain, I refer to all people of African heritage in Britain. Of course, it might be claimed that if we go back far enough in history everyone is of African heritage and so this term applies to all humans. That is a persuasive argument, but an approach not normally adopted, not least because the Africans that I refer to have generally been hidden from the Eurocentric rendering of history. The image which has been used to publicise this lecture is a useful start because nobody really knows who this African man is – he might represent every African in the 18th century and for me he represents something about the history of the African diaspora in general. We don't know anything about who he is and where he came from, but we can all agree that he was an African. He was certainly significant enough to be painted but even if he was not immortalised in this way, we should still wish to know about the thousands of Africans who were here in Britain at that time. There is no reason why they should be excluded from history.

The history of these diverse Africans goes back at least to Roman time and quite possibly one thousand years before that. Peter Fryer has even claimed that Africans were in Britain before the ancestors of the English, perhaps a rather provocative way of making the point. The Museum of London has recently illustrated its recent Roman Dead exhibition with the image of a woman of African heritage in order to highlight the many Africans who lived and died in Roman London. In particular that image highlights recent tests on the remains of the 'Lant Street Teenager,' as she is known who was only fourteen at the time of her death, had been born in North Africa but probably had sub-Saharan African ancestry. The teenager had only been living in London a few years prompting questions about the circumstances of her migration. Another skeleton found in Roman London is of a middle-aged African man who had probably grown up in London and suffered from diabetes. DNA analysis of such remains show the diversity of population at the time and that Africans could be found living in many parts of Britain.

Recent analysis of human remains also suggests that not only those of North African origin found their way to Britain but also others from sub-Saharan Africa such as 'Beachy Head Lady.' The lady in question refers to skeletal remains first discovered near Eastbourne in southern England. The remains are thought to date from the mid third century CE in the middle of the Roman period and are of a young woman. Although she is thought to have grown up in the area analysis of her remains suggests that her origin was clearly African, and from a part of Africa that was not included within the Roman empire, but she was probably either born in Sussex, or brought to Britain at a very young age. Such evidence poses fascinating questions about the past and the possibility of families of African living in Britain in ancient times.

Such examples are being found all over the country, most notably in the city of York where the remains of the African Ivory Bangle Lady, as she is known, have become well-known. At the beginning of the 20th century people digging in a street in York discovered a 1700-year old stone coffin of a woman. She had been buried with jewellery, including jet and ivory bracelets, as well as other possessions and was undoubtedly of elite status. It was not until 2010 that archaeologists were fully able to analyse the skeleton which they found to be of a young woman, probably 18-23 years old and of North African origin. The archaeologists were even able to make a reconstruction to show us what this African 'ivory bangle lady' may have looked like. This and other research have shown that those of African heritage, including African women of all classes, were a settled population before the arrival of the Angles and Saxons. These findings prompted one leading archaeologist to conclude that 'analysis of the 'Ivory Bangle Lady' and others like her, contradicts common popular assumptions about the make-up of Roman-British populations as well as the view that African immigrants in Roman Britain were of low status, male and likely to have been slaves. Such finds not only show that Roman Britain was 'multicultural' but that Africans not only lived in Roman Britain but were almost certainly born here too. Some were clearly of high status and at least two of those who migrated from Africa, Septimius Severus and Quintus Lollius Urbicus were rulers of this country.

All this suggests that histories of Britain need to be presented in a rather different way than they have in the past. In short, that Africans cannot and should not be excluded from the history of Britain, nor as the makers of history in Britain. An even more interesting development is the recent revelation in February 2018 that the those whom might be considered some of the first Britons, that is the first to provide genes that can be found amongst some of the modern inhabitants of Britain, had 'dark to black' skin, as well as dark hair and blue eyes. Indeed, one newspaper headline boldly proclaimed that according to the latest DNA study 'the first Britons were black.' The research analysed the skeletal remains of Cheddar Man, first discovered in a cave in Somerset in 1903, who is thought to have lived in England some 10,000 years ago amongst a population of only 12,000. That study showed that migrants who originated in Africa, and came to Britain via western Asia and Europe, maintained darker skin pigmentation for much longer periods and that the development of pale skin pigmentation took place much more recently that was previously thought. The research into the origins and appearance of Cheddar Man, suggests that the population of western European hunter-gatherers of that period almost certainly looked similar to Cheddar Man, with dark to black skin. The earliest Europeans just like the earliest Britons could also be considered black people. Notions of Britishness and Englishness once more need to be re-thought.

Early history also reveals key individuals who had a major influence throughout ancient Britain. Reports such as those from the Venerable Bede record that the North African abbot Hadrian was sent by the Pope to accompany the new Archbishop of Canterbury to England in 668 CE. Hadrian, it is reported, was initially asked to become archbishop himself but refused the post. He later become the abbot of St Peter and St Paul's in Canterbury. Bede described him as 'vir natione Afir,' which has been translated as a 'man of African race.' His exact origins are however unknown, and some historians suggest that he was a Berber from what is today Libya. It is thought that Hadrian had a major influence on the structure of the Christian church in England, which he helped to reform, as

well as on education and Anglo-Saxon literature. It is thought that he brought with him some important North African literary works and introduced students to new ideas in various subjects from astronomy to philosophy.

It is now evident that Africans were in Britain in very ancient times but what of the modern period? I began by mentioning my own experience and I want to return to that now. When I started research there were very few other researchers, very few books and a popular idea that the African diaspora, those of African and Caribbean heritage, only arrived in Britain in the post-war period. For me at that time there were several important considerations. I wanted to look into my own family history in the sense that I needed to know more about those Africans who came to Britain as students and for other purposes in the twentieth century, just as my father had when he arrived from Nigeria. Second, I was concerned to provide more evidence to refute the notion that an African diaspora only existed in Britain in the post-war period and was mainly connected with those who migrated from the Caribbean. Third, and perhaps because I came from a background studying African History, I rejected the idea that the study of African History generally excluded the diaspora, a notion that still persists today, or that the history of Britain could also exclude the history of the African diaspora. For me there was just one inter-related history, I didn't see how it could be understood in any other way and I wanted to find out more. I also wanted to find out much more about the political activities of the African diaspora and how people had struggled against racism and all the consequences of colonial rule. I wanted to learn from history in order to address the racism and other related problems that I faced growing up in Britain.

African students have been coming to Britain since the 16th century. It even became fashionable in the 18th century and prospective students such as William Ansah tell us much about the exploitative relationship that then existed between Britain and West Africa at that time. Ansah was the son of a human trafficker who was himself enslaved and then rescued by human traffickers in Britain so that his father would again allow the resumption of human trafficking. We can see that from his portrait that he was well looked after in London, before being returned to his father in West Africa. In short, we can see that the human trafficking which provided the wealth allowing Britain's economic transformation was generated throughout a relationship between the rich and powerful in Britain and their counterparts in Africa, although much to the advantage of the former.

We can discover much about Britain's history by investigating the history of Africans in Britain. The main features of Britain's history in the 18th century are the struggles that developed around liberty and human rights and the struggle against slavery was one of the most important aspects of this struggle. Indeed, it was one of the largest political campaigns in Britain's history, involving men, women and children and with Africans, such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano, Jonathan Strong and James Somerset, playing an important role but often largely hidden from view today. When this country commemorated the Parliamentary abolition of the slave trade in 2007 much was made of the great and good, such as Wilberforce and other Members of Parliament, and much less about the role of Africans and their allies amongst the working people of this country. At that time Equiano and his comrades in the London Corresponding Society clearly understood and advanced the principle that their security was based on their joint struggle and that it was vital to fight for and defend the rights of all. This principle was further developed in the 19th century by the Chartists and their leaders such as William Cuffay. It has also been an important principle of advanced political thinking throughout the 20th century.

But what of the African diaspora in the twentieth century. In that century the activities of those of African heritage was again a central part of Britain's history because it involved a struggle against two significant and inter-related phenomena – colonialism and racism, which in the early part of the century was referred to as the colour bar. Although I was particularly interested in those who came to Britain from West Africa, those who organised themselves into various groups such as the Nigerian Progress Union, West African Students' Union and Committee of African Organisations. It

became evident that they often collaborated with those from the Caribbean and elsewhere, indeed, the Nigerian Progress Union was jointly founded by a Jamaican woman living in Britain, Amy Ashwood Garvey. They formed Pan-African organisations such as the African Association, the International African Service Bureau, the Pan-African Federation and they also organised and participated in Pan-African congresses. These organisations also established links with those in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, the US and similar elsewhere as well as others in Britain campaigning against racism and colonialism such as the Fabian Colonial Bureau, the League Against Imperialism and perhaps most importantly the Communist Party, which in the period before the mid-1950s was the main champion of the struggle against racism and colonialism and was connected to a global movement. My initial interest in African students and the African diaspora in Britain led me into the global history of Pan-Africanism and the history of international communism. It led me to examine the activities of those who struggled against the status quo, women like Alice Kinloch, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Olu Solanke, Irene Ighodalo, or men such as Bandele Omoniyi, Ladipo Solanke, George Padmore Obi Egbuna, not forgetting communists such as Desmond Buckle, who lived in London most of his life and Len Johnson, who was born in Britain and Claudia Jones who was deported to Britain. In short, my interest in the African diaspora could not be understood apart from some understanding general history of Britain as well as global history, and of course without some reference to the modern history of Africa and the wider African diaspora. I found that this history could not be research and written about just from archives in Britain but some of the most important finds were from archives in Nigeria, Russia, Holland, France, the USA etc.

To give just one example the WASU was based in London but it established branches throughout West Africa, which in turn led to the creation of anti-colonial organisations such as the Nigerian Youth Movement and Gold Coast Youth Conference. Perhaps most importantly when the WASU in London needed finance, it sent it secretary-general, Ladipo Solanke to West Africa to raise money. It was that support that enabled the Union to open its first hostel in Camden in 1932. When those in West Africa wanted to agitate for some political change in the colonial system, they might telegram their concerns to the WASU in London. In turn these would be passed onto sympathetic MPs. A problem occurring in Lagos one day might be posed as a parliamentary question the next, to the astonishment and concern of the Colonial Office.

The period after 1948 is often termed, quite arbitrarily the Windrush era, or perhaps the era of the Windrush generation. In Britain's history it might perhaps also be seen as a time of the intensification of post-war racism directed against the African diaspora, as well as against others, but in effect directed against all Britain's citizens, since it created divisions and confusions as to the source of the problems confronting people. Key events include the large-scale attacks that starting in Liverpool in 1948, and in London and Birmingham in 1949 and these attacks in different forms have continued to the present time, as the events of this year have highlighted. This is an aspect of the history of Britain and its African diaspora that I do not have time to go into here. However, one aspect of it is the effect that it has on the presentation of history. We are often presented with a hierarchy of history, or perhaps histories, a reflection of the fact that history is often contested as highlighted in the proverbial expression. 'Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter.'

In our concern for the hidden history of the African diaspora in Britain we often grasp what appears to be most visible. The arrival of the *Empire Windrush,* for example, which was filmed by *Pathé* and caused something of a stir in government circles. There were troop ships returning to Britain from the Caribbean before June 1948 but their significance has become hidden. There is also the unfortunate consequence that the history of the African diaspora in Britain after 1948 all too often becomes a history only of those with close connections with the Caribbean. That history and those connections are important, of course, but they do not make up the total history of the African diaspora in Britain which, especially in the 21st century, increasingly has direct connections with the African continent. What are the dangers of this single story? One danger is that other important

histories become neglected and hidden and therefore history becomes distorted. We end up with a hierarchy of histories, with some apparently more visible and therefore seen as more important than others.

Let me provide one example. 1948 was also the year when the NHS was created, and the NHS therefore now has a history of over seventy years duration. Most people would quite rightly consider that the NHS has been built by everyone in Britain including the many migrants who have come to this country from all over the world. Indeed, migrants have often been recruited from all over the world including Africa and the Caribbean. If we take the example of the history of female health-workers, it would be unthinkable today to exclude those nurses and other professionals from the Caribbean. Indeed, the BBC even produced a documentary which is regularly aired entitled *Black Nurses: The Women Who Saved the NHS*. I'm sure that everyone involved was concerned to tell the complete story but the overwhelming majority of those who featured in the programme were of Caribbean heritage – the testimonies of those of African heritage were almost completely hidden. There appeared to be few lions to tell their story.

The consequence is that then there is an effort to perhaps counter that one-sided and incomplete presentation of the history. Perhaps people look for the most visible African women at the time of the creation of the NHS. They seem to have decided upon Kofoworola Abeni Pratt, a distinguished nurse from Nigeria who was one of the first to train at the Nightingale School of Nursing in London from 1946-1949, later became the Chief Nursing Officer in Nigeria and 'the first black women to become a vice-president of the International Council of Nurses.' As a consequence, she has often been named as 'the first black nurse to work for the NHS.' However, close investigation and the research carried out by the Young Historians Project (YHP) recently has perhaps no unsurprisingly uncovered several other African nurses who were training in Britain at that time and might equally be awarded the title of 'the first black nurse to work for the NHS' if such a title was useful. The YHP was itself created as another consequence of this hidden history – the fact that so few young people of African or Caribbean heritage seek to engage with history, enter those professions associated with it, or become teachers of history. Of course African women had been training as nurses in Britain for many years before 1948, as is evident from the recorded exploits of Tsehai, the daughter of the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, and the sadly lost film *Nurse Ademola*, made during the Second World War to record the training of Adenrele Ademola, the daughter of the Alake of Abeokuta. One African women, Lulu Coote, spent her entire life nursing in Britain from the time of the First World War. There is unfortunately not time the many African women doctors and other health workers. The African diaspora includes women of both Caribbean and African heritage and these women continue to be recruited to work in the NHS not just in Britain but also as part of the 'brain drain' from their countries of origin even in the 21st century.

At the start of this lecture I indicated that I had deliberately chosen the topic the African diaspora in Britain. Of course, it is impossible to cover it in one lecture, or even in one Black History Month, just as it would be possible to cover the history of Britain, or the history of Africa in one lecture, or one month. No doubt some will say that this lecture should have included this or that and I can only agree. The history of the African diaspora in Britain is immense, dating back thousands of years, integral to an understanding of Britain's past and present and connecting Britain not only to Africa and the Caribbean but also the rest of the world. It is important for all of us to gain a view of history that is not distorted or one-sided, one that not only allows us to understand the past but also provides an outlook on the present, which helps us to understand the world and, we hope, to change it.

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