

Interview - Adeoti Dipeolu

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features and our continuing series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Adeoti Dipeolu is a Doctoral candidate at the African Leadership Centre (ALC) at King's College London where she is working on her thesis tentatively titled, *The Leadership Dimensions of Diaspora Involvement in Peace Processes: US Liberian Diaspora and the Politics of Peacebuilding*. She is also a Research Assistant at the ALC and Coordinator of their Leading Practitioners Program. Adeoti is interested in public policy, security and development. She has contributed to several research projects including the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) funded project, *Reframing Narratives of State-building and Peacebuilding in Africa*. Adeoti also contributed to a FEMNET Beijing 20 plus report which reviewed the progress of African states on women's empowerment. In addition, she has contributed to other research work on gender and youth for several international organisations including the African Union and UN Women. Adeoti holds an MA in Public Policy from the University of East Anglia, a BA in International Relations from Agnes Scott College and experience in programme management.

What (or who) promoted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

There are several events and moments in my life that I attribute to my growing interest in the diaspora and specifically the relationships they have with their homelands. The first significant event was a talk I attended during my undergraduate programme where a woman of Somali heritage shared her experience with female genital mutilation and how that incident had shaped the ways in which she engaged with the issue through advocating against the practice, both in her host community (Atlanta) and also back at home.

The second is my own personal background and experience. As a child, and now as an adult, I have always had a link to Nigeria, even though I grew up and lived in several different countries. This relationship has manifested in different ways from visiting over the holidays, doing internships there, to engaging in events and activities in my different host countries. I have also found myself engaged in discourses around different subjects from the recent election to the Boko Haram crisis. The latter leading me to create a Change.org campaign petitioning the government to respond to the kidnapping of the Chibok Girls.

The third event that I attribute my research interest to is the different examples I witness daily of different diaspora communities coming together in their host lands, and the ways they engage with issues from protests around specific events to sending money home through fundraising (such as during the Ebola crisis in West Africa). When the time came for me to pursue my PhD, I felt certain that I wanted to examine this relationship further as I became increasingly curious as to how these relationships were manifesting in the homelands and what sort of outcomes and solutions were occurring.

What is the importance of Black History Month and what does it represent to you?

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Black History Month for me represents a time to really reflect on and celebrate the achievements and contributions of people of colour to the different areas of life; from art, to history, to science, to academia, to medicine, just to name a few. It is also a time to acknowledge the breadth and depth of the different cultures and histories, all of which are linked by several threads. And more importantly, how these cultures are evolving today and how they are being integrated across different societies globally. Black History Month is also a time to honour those who have walked before us and have paved the path for us in these different areas. As an early career scholar, it is a time for me to honour, celebrate and remember those in academia and the public sector who have fought battles we won't have to fight. While we continue to celebrate and reflect daily, there is something special about having a dedicated time to come together and host events dedicated to music, art, food, and conversations around everything pertaining to the different 'black' cultures found here in London.

You are currently the coordinator of the African Leadership Centre's Leading Practitioners Project. What have you learnt in this position?

Being in this position has exposed me to senior practitioners in the field of security and development, all of whom come with a wide range of experience that they have freely shared with the team. Each day is a new experience and opportunity to grow, however, there are three key things that I can take away from this position. First, I have been able to use the practical leadership experiences of these practitioners to bridge my understanding of the leadership theories I am engaging with in the literature. Second, through the various interactions and sessions I have learned how to critically 'challenge' my world view and other views, especially around my work but also around how peace is being understood and approached. Third, through this position I have been exposed to the process of writing a book and the overall publishing process.

How influential is diaspora involvement in peacebuilding and state-building?

Across the literature on the diaspora, especially in relation to peacebuilding and conflict, there is a consistency in the debate around the influence these groups have on the affairs of their homelands. Although the arguments are narrowly around their engagement being either positive or negative, there is also an acknowledgement that the diaspora can play both roles; this is due to the heterogeneity of the phenomenon itself. The ways in which the diaspora engage, by lobbying, protesting, sending remittances home, and investing in development projects, is also consistent across many global examples. All these activities have and continue to contribute to some of the outcomes that are emerging in their respective homelands. Take for example, the role the Irish American diaspora played in the processes that led to the creation of the peace agreement. Because of this engagement there has been an increasing interest in further engaging these groups by many home and host governments.

In the case of my own research, the Liberian diaspora and their relationship with and the ways they engage in Liberia is consistent and reflects some of the debates in the existing literature. There is evidence of the ways in which they contributed to perpetuating the civil war in the 90s and of increasing engagement towards promoting peace and helping with development in Liberia. What I have yet to find and is partly a core element of my thesis, is what the nature of that relationship is at a micro/local level and specifically what sort of exchanges are occurring between these local communities and their diaspora.

You worked on the project "Reframing Narratives of State-building and Peacebuilding." What is the current narrative surrounding this and why is it important that it is reframed?

This project set out to reframe the narratives around peacebuilding processes especially in Africa. Existing and current narratives presuppose that state building must happen before peacebuilding. Thus, they have been approached as two distinct processes. This understanding is linked to the liberal peace agenda, where the focus has been to build states in a certain way because of the assumptions that a certain type of state can lead to peace being achieved. This project aimed to challenge this notion and instead argues that one does not come before the other but that they are on a continuum. The importance of framing it differently is that the existing narratives fail to capture the reality in a lot of conflict affected states. This is especially the case when looking at examples from the African continent where state building processes are ongoing. This is in part a result of conflict but also the nature of the

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formation of African states. Thus, understanding that the two processes are not entirely separate begins to challenge the way in which both processes and especially peacebuilding is approached.

What are you currently working on?

Right now, my primary focus is to finish my PhD. However, I have also been working towards developing other research both from my own area of interest and the wider discourses on diaspora, migration and transnationalism. In October 2018, I presented a paper at a conference at Vanderbilt University and it is currently in the works to be eventually published.

What advice would you give to young scholars?

The best advice I would give is to first and foremost have passion for your subject area. Having this passion will drive you even through the slower moments. I would also advise that you read widely and stay informed both on your area of interest but also more broadly. Often, reading outside of your subject area can trigger a wave of ideas, in the same way talking to people can. This brings me to my next piece of advice, which is to engage with your networks and research communities. They are very important both for your professional and personal growth because you get to learn so much from other people, perspectives and disciplines.