Africa and Slavery in a Global Context

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No topic illustrates the African location in the international system better than slavery, both as an institution and as a system of commerce. While chattel slavery is virtually dead in most parts of the world, new categories and processes of exploitation have emerged in ways that bring us back to the characteristics that defined slavery in the past. The Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, the Cold War, and the lingering economic status of Africa as a dependent continent are some of the most critical historical developments that tie Africa to the rest of the world. Of those ties, slavery and the slave trade remain the most compelling, their impact lingering to this day. A social institution connected with commerce produced a culture that manifested the intricacies and dangers of globalization. In any discussion of slavery, the transatlantic slave trade looms large. No other cases of human traffic compare with the transatlantic in its magnitude and impact. Many will agree with David Northrup’s summary of its centrality:

First, it brought many millions of Africans to the Americas (four times the number of European immigrants who settled there down to about 1820), leaving a permanent cultural and genetic imprint on many parts of the New World. Second, the creation of slave labor systems in the New World was associated with the first phase of European expansion and the rise of capitalism. Third, the end of the slave trade was the subject of a massive abolitionist campaign that scholars widely have seen as one of the great turning points in Western moral consciousness. Finally, the Atlantic slave trade has been seen not only as affecting Africa during the four centuries of its existence but
also as leading to the later European takeover of the continent and causing its present-day underdevelopment.¹

The transatlantic slave trade and the Americas’ experience of slavery shape the way we look at the subject, and they dominate much of the space on writing about the African diaspora.

To work backward from the present to the past: the development of an Afrocentric paradigm in the United States, especially by Professor Molefi Kete Asante and his disciples, and the assertive demands for area studies are tied to a strong belief among blacks that the academy cares little about them and their concerns; that if they do not develop alternatives to mainstream knowledge, topics such as slavery and the slave trade will either be ignored or treated with levity or duplicity. In his combative memoir, Asante even attributes the creation of an alternative PhD program at Temple University to the politics of race and what he sees as the deliberate undermining of issues relating to minorities in mainstream disciplines.² In this program, Africa takes a center stage. As he closes his memoir, he exudes confidence, declaring that:

The real work of this century is not going to be about race, color, or Black Studies but rather about the deep quest for African identity, liberated from mental enslavement on the continent and in the Diaspora, and gaining United Africa based on democratic power and founded on the realization of the dreams of Marcus Garvey, DuBois, Kwame Nkrumah, Muammar Gaddafi, and Cheikh Anta Diop.³

Asante’s ‘quest for African identity’ is hard to separate from race, color, and the very history of the slave trade that defined the Atlantic World for centuries. As he noted, until that legacy of “mental enslavement” is eradicated, moving forward may be too difficult. The names he invoked, all controversial figures in one way or another, reveal his support for the kinds of struggles the men had, all linked by a desire to create a powerful solidarity among Blacks in different parts of the world.

Before the rise of the Afrocentric paradigm that Asante popularized, the Pan-Africanist movement developed as a diaspora organization by descendants of slaves

³ Ibid., 310.
who wanted to transcend the limitations of slavery and colonial exploitation, overcome dependence on other races, and create a new African world. Pan-Africanism responded to the earlier consolidation of racist ideologies and regimes, arising in part from the slave trade. By the nineteenth century, the West had imbibed an attitude of utter disrespect for Africa, and this has carried over to the present. Many argue that this lack of respect owes to the transatlantic slave trade, when the idea of racism was consolidated in ways that were very much tied to slavery. Various arguments over the era of the slave trade continue to be repackaged today, often disguised in elegant language and theories to mask the ideologies: Africa remains the primitive ‘Other;’ the continent that requires rescue missions; a people without a worthy past or significant future. An ‘impending anarchy’ is in the horizon, we have been told many times, and many pessimistic analysts have concluded that projects of colonization, similar to those of the nineteenth century, deserve being pursued.

What the analysts forget to mention, not because they are ignorant, but because it is convenient to forget, is that Africa’s problems, in many of its forms and ramifications, owe both to the inadequacies of its political leaders and the limited imagination of its planners on the one hand, as well as to Africa’s role in the larger world on the other. Slavery represents one reason for underdevelopment. Africa is a huge continent, but its total population of less than 800 million is rather small. The slave trade is in part responsible for this, and the gains of the first half of the twentieth century that led to population increases are being wiped out in some places by the ravages of AIDS.

I hope I have mentioned a few points to indicate that the legacies of slavery do remain. It is this theme that I intend to explore in this chapter, focusing on the globalization generated by slavery and its aftermath. We all know that the issues are many, the complications too countless to mention, and that controversies abound. I will focus on three major ideas: how slavery has impacted African history; the continued existence of slavery in the modern world; and the current discussions on new categories of exploitation.
The Past and Its Troubles

The starting point is how slavery created a diaspora and what this means to us today. European expansion after the fifteenth century was impressive, part of the achievements of the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. Technological improvements and the consequences of the creation of nation-states as projects empowered Europe in ways that devastated Africans, with the transatlantic slave trade as one major outcome. The early contacts established by the Portuguese were not sustained for long through trade in gold, raw products, and weapons, but in humans, following the heavy demand for labor in the New World. The establishment of small forts and the seizure of places along the coast to create trading colonies in the mid-fifteenth century established patterns that increased in scale and intensity over the years. In later years, the trade in slaves became large, highly professionalized, and truly global in its operations. The encounter was forceful and fatal, changing many aspects of the continent and its institutions in profound ways. It is now difficult, and nearly impossible in some cases, to comprehend African political and economic institutions before the rise of the transatlantic slavery. While Africans continued to keep some traditions of old, it was clear that many had to be adjusted to the needs of slavery and the global trade in slaves. At the same time, they had to accept new ideas from abroad and to Africanize many of them in order to survive. Slavery became an established social institution in various parts of the world. Practices of enslavement acquired notions of racism in some places, and contributed to laws and ideas that allowed one person to own, inherit, and sell fellow human beings. Ethical and moral codes arose to justify enslavement and wars to enslave and sell; and rules were established on rights and duties between masters and slaves.

To be sure, Europe cannot claim to have pioneered all things connected with slavery. Arab slave traders and recruiters had been active for many years before the fifteenth century, moving Africans across the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to different parts of Asia. We cannot accurately calculate the number of slaves that were also moved

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across the Sahara Desert to North Africa and the Middle East, and the Mediterranean Sea to southern Europe, especially during the eighth century. Arabs and Europeans sold Islam and Christianity to Africans, but not the sects that saw slavery as an assault on human rights. The Arabs connected the jihad with slavery, and the holy wars became an opportunity to turn war captives into slaves; consequently, the wars and captives multiplied in number as Islam spread into various parts of North, East, and West Africa. Africans in the savanna, those in the eastern and central parts, and the Horn suffered the most in what is now called by some as the ‘oriental slave trade.’ Africans were used to serve in the army and state administrations, and as domestics. Women and children were preferred. In the Horn where the women were portrayed as obedient, honest, and beautiful, thousands of Oromo, Ethiopians, and Nilotic women suffered a great deal, as they were relocated to other lands to become concubines and domestics. With respect to male slaves, Arab merchants who stayed within the continent, as with the plantation owners along the East African coast, needed them for intensive farm work. Raiding expeditions were many, devastating various areas.

The Arab slave dealers have been less scrutinized by African scholars. For one thing, Islam is presented in many parts of Africa as an indigenous religion; Christianity as external; Islam as pro-protest; Christianity as pro-Western. Elements of this historical presentation have led to the marginalization of oriental slavery, such that we talk more of the transatlantic than the trans-Saharan. The literature on the Indian Ocean slave trade is poorly connected to the larger body of the literature on slavery. Even assertive demands for reparations leave Islamic areas out of it. As if slavery and the slave trade had some redeeming values, oriental slavery is sometimes defended because it involved fewer victims (under five million compared to about thirteen million from the transatlantic slave trade); and emancipation was easier to obtain, thus promoting integration with society. While some of the comparisons are valid, the context of the economic systems must be borne in mind: expansive economic systems did not emerge in most parts of the Arab world as intensely as in the American plantation economies. Neither did many slave communities emerge. But racism and exploitation were not

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foreign to the system. Today, Sudan represents the survival of elements of Islamic slavery. It was through the Arab connection that Africans found themselves in Arabia, India, and the Far East, traveling great distances as slaves carried across the Sahara Desert, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Surviving as minorities, communities of descendants of African slaves can be found today in Iraq, Iran, India, and Pakistan.

Nothing, however, can compare to the heinous transatlantic slave trade. In attempting to underplay its damages and spread the blame, two issues have always been debated. One is the existing indigenous slavery before, during, and after the transatlantic slave trade. The other is the role of Africans within it. With respect to the nature of indigenous slavery, three points are relevant. It is abundantly clear that indigenous slavery in the nineteenth and twentieth century was a response to the external demands for raw materials on a large scale. Palm oil, palm kernel, peanuts, cocoa, and others were labor intensive. Thus, slavery during that era must be connected to a global economic system, with Africa playing the role allocated to it in the international division of labor. Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, what we call indigenous slavery was also transformed by the transatlantic slave trade. The external trade injected violence into the system and relationships of power were sharply defined, with a widening gap between those who managed the state and the poor producers. Definitions of social relationships increasingly responded to external pressures. As to the nature of slavery before the fifteenth century, we actually do not have substantial evidence on various practices, and some scholars such as Walter Rodney have denied that it existed in ways that we define for the nineteenth century. The definition of indigenous slavery continues to pose problems, as some are inclined to regard it as a mild form of servitude. Some scholars have warned that we may be confusing a slave with a serf. So too do the characteristics of slavery in Africa when they are compared and contrasted with transatlantic slavery, with African practices not similar to those of slavery in American plantation economies. No one denies that slavery was practiced in one form or another in various places, representing a major way to accumulate assets, and expand the labor

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force. The real issue that is always ignored is clear: domestic slavery did not instigate the external slave trade, nor did it establish the conditions for the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Existing institutions of dependence could have been modified to take care of the external demand for slaves, in the process turning servants, political clients, and war captives into slaves.

As to the second issue of African complicity, one must make a distinction between people and states, between the poor and rich, strangers and citizens, the continent and the ethnic units. Slavery and the slave trade involved the massive use of violence, in wars and military expeditions, markets protected by the state, and the power to make criminals and punish them. The tiny political class associated with the state saw benefits in the trade: the acquisition of resources to build and consolidate the state; self-enrichment and aggrandizement; and competition with fellow chiefs and neighboring states. This tiny political class collaborated with those who instigated and sustained the demands for slaves. When a greedy political class saw the opportunity to connect indigenous slavery with the external trade in slaves, the scale of brutality became boundless with wars—even those justified on the basis of state formation—converting innocent war victims into slaves. Economic gain motivated African chiefs, just as it motivated those who approached them for slaves. In a complex global economy, Africans were asked to supply the labor, Europe the capital, and the Americas the land to produce sugar cane, cotton, and tobacco. The African chiefs, no matter how much blame is apportioned to them, neither created this global economy nor served as its main financial managers.

Treating the slave trade as nothing but business tends to downgrade its human costs, its far-reaching consequences. When Philip Curtin came up with an estimated figure of 11.5 million as having left Africa, with 9.5 million actually reaching the Americas, the data generated controversy, the political side of which saw it as one effort to underplay the significance of the slave trade. Critics ignored Curtin’s remark that a reduction in the estimate of the number of enslaved Africans did not lessen the harm caused by the trade. Statistics are one thing; their interpretation is another. The

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8 Discussions on a variety of practices can be found in Jay Spalding and Stephanie Beswick, eds., African Systems of Slavery (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2010).
overall impact on Africa’s population has also been a subject of contention: while no one disputes the fact that the slave trade contributed to a population decrease, some point to other reasons such as wars, droughts, epidemics, and other forms of disaster. The population structure in some areas was altered in negative ways, in large part because of the enslavement of their adult males. And millions of people suffered in the process of being captured, stored, transported, and exploited. More men than women left the continent as slaves, and the women left behind became intensely exploited for their productive labor, especially as farm workers. Africa became the labor basket that sustained the economic enterprises of European settlers in the New World. The price it paid is incalculable. Violence spread, as slaves were obtained mainly through wars and raiding expeditions. The most devastated areas were Angola and areas north of the Congo River and the Gulf of Guinea, and large areas in their hinterlands. After the eighteenth century, Southeastern Africa was drawn into the slave trade, thus spreading the devastation.

The slave trade scattered blacks to various parts of the world, in large part a consequence of centuries of slave trafficking. Thus, we have blacks in various continents, as part of both forced and voluntary migrations. The origins of the blacks in diaspora approximate to the main sources of slave supply: West Africa supplied the majority, and others were drawn from southwest and central Africa (areas of Cameroon, Congo, Angola, Gabon, and Zaire). Many slaves from East Africa went to the islands in the Indian Ocean and Brazilian plantations. So entrenched are blacks in these various places that not many see the connections to Africa or understand its history; and some do not have clusters that are powerful enough to construct politics around those connections. An articulate minority has always pointed to the connections in the diaspora, using it to build political movements.

Many have argued that the contributions of Africans and diasporan Africans to Western economies and civilization have been ignored, maligned, or underrepresented.

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Yet certain things are not at all controversial. Slavery made it possible for the New World to become part of a global economy, facilitated by the Europeans who recruited the slaves from Africa and sent them to the Western Hemisphere where they became the major labor force. Why Africans constituted the significant portion of the labor force has been a subject of contention: economic reasons combined with racialist ones, and as David Eltis argues, as well as with the belief that Europeans should not enslave one another, thus making Africans the most desired slaves.13

Due to slavery, the Atlantic region became an active trading network that united four continents in the exchange of people, goods, and services. Credit and capital also developed as a result of slave trade. European merchants invested large sums of money in ships and goods; guns and other goods were produced in large quantities to sell in exchange for slaves. All the participants were affected: the New World produced commodities that were traded to Europe in ways that affected the economies of such countries as Great Britain, the Netherlands, Portugal, and France.14 Slaves contributed to the colonization and development of the Americas, enabled Brazil to become the leading producer of sugar, and made it possible for the Dutch to create successful sugar plantations in the West Indies, for the English to do the same in Jamaica and Barbados, and for the French in Saint Domingue. Slavery also shaped the identities of blacks and whites and contributed to defining the character of European imperialism. The legacies of racism and contrasting identities remain in various parts of the world.15

Trying to show the varied impact of blacks on the creation of Western civilization has become a major academic industry that partly led to the emergence of the combative Afrocentric framework. The gentle side of the paradigm looks at issues from the ‘African perspectives,’ writing history from the bottom up, focusing on issues of slave resistance and rebellion, African anti-abolitionism, and the various

15 See, for instance, Jose C. Curto and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., Enslaving Connections: Changing Cultures of Africa and Brazil During the Era of Slavery (New York: Humanity Books, 2004).
contributions of Africans to the development of other places. The 1944 survey by Eric Williams lays the foundation: he shows the crucial role of the slave trade in building commercial capitalism, and he argues that the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century also had to do with the emergence of a new generation of industrial capitalists who could profit by other means. Some of Eric Williams’ conclusions have been modified or rejected, but they remain widely influential. A major recent achievement of the historiography more aligned to the views of Williams is the brilliant book by Joseph E. Inikori who shows—with relentless energy, massive data, and mastery of the economic history of Britain—that the Atlantic commerce and the role of African labor in it contributed to the completion of the industrialization process between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.16

The contributions are not limited to the economies. Various studies have shown profound black imprints on American religions, music, and cuisines.17 With cultural survival and adaptation at work, a spirit of ‘double consciousness’ and cultural hybridity was put in place: African slaves and their successors would keep those elements in African cultures that were possible while integrating into new environments. Africa enabled them to create an identity while their host societies made possible the creation of new ways to live. Something new emerged in the process: the “modernity and double consciousness” that Paul Gilroy presents in *The Black Atlantic.*18

The less aggressive side of the Afrocentric paradigm sees the beginning of the decline of Africa from the slave trade era, an idea widely popularized by Walter Rodney.19 In spite of the challenges offered to Rodney, most recently by John Thornton,20 Afrocentricists keep the argument alive. To continue with Rodney’s schema, the slave trade era was followed by colonialism, which incorporated the continent into a global economy in an exploitative manner. Decolonization did not bring

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about the much-anticipated changes, as the colonialists handed over power to a political class with values not different from theirs. The logic of exploitation was perpetuated, as the postcolonial leaders did not pursue a serious agenda of development. Rather, they merely facilitated neocolonial dependence, the marginalization of Africa, and the impoverishment of their own people. The failure to dismantle the institutions constructed around slavery and colonialism has created problems at a time when the technologies of global domination have become more efficient and more threatening.

**Legacies and Lingering Problems**

Slavery also has its recent history, a dirty aspect of the so-called modern twentieth century. Slavery and the slave trade survived the nineteenth century, as Brazil and Cuba did not enact laws to end slavery until the late 1880s. Abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, however, in the early nineteenth century did not translate into the abolition of slavery in Africa. In many parts of Africa, practices associated with slavery and other forms of servility continued well into the twentieth century. While contributing to its abolition on the one hand, European colonial governments contributed to the survival of slavery on the other hand. The international demand for African products led to the extensive use of slave labor to produce and carry raw materials to the coastal cities. As a result, slavery had a slow death, surviving in some places till the 1930s.

The need for labor to work on the creation of new infrastructures encouraged colonial officers to tap into various relations of servitude, notably forced labor. In the early decades of the colonial era, the need to sustain an economy based on cash crops allowed for the toleration of slavery. The demand for raw materials also meant that many colonial officers overlooked abuses and cared less about the consolidation of social hierarchies. Many colonial governments also used labor in ways not different

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from slavery, such as forced labor, poorly remunerated labor, and semi-slave workers.\textsuperscript{24} Pawnship consolidated itself in many areas, in ways not too different from slavery, largely to create cheap labor for cash crops.\textsuperscript{25} A fascinating case study has been done on the island of Fernando Po, which developed a plantation economy in the late nineteenth century. The migrant labor upon which the economy of Fernando Po relied worked in conditions not much different from slavery. Ibrahim Sundiata shows how free and contract labor shared many things in common, concluding that free labor did not always triumph over slavery.\textsuperscript{26} As he concludes, “Far from collapsing, traditional slaving networks interdigitated with the new traffic in ‘contract laborers.’”\textsuperscript{27} In some other areas where raw materials were profitable, there were various ways to bind workers to the land in a way that benefited landlords and rich merchants. Wage labor could exist, but it did not necessarily mean that its conditions produced freedom and a higher standard of living. To return to the Fernando Po experience, the failure “to produce a self-replicating population created policies which made the distinction between slave and contract workers at times no more than nominal.”\textsuperscript{28} Slavery was compatible with imperialism: “the triumph of British-imposed abolition and emancipation coincided with the increasing exploitation of the worker and the tying of the laborer to the plantation.”\textsuperscript{29} Women have probably suffered more, staying much longer in socioeconomic conditions akin to slavery than men who could opt for wage-sector jobs.

In precolonial African formations where land was plentiful, the struggle was to obtain the means to obtain labor. In colonial economies, both land and labor became necessary to have in abundance in order to benefit from the modern economies. Wealth had to be extracted from both land and labor. As slavery declined in importance, alternative forms of servitude were either invented or improved upon, many in relation to debt. Pawnship of crops, of trees, and of the poor used debts to create access to cheap

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 8.
labor. Unlike the slaves with their outsider status, the new pawn could be an insider, even with well-known, visible kinship connections. A number of the aspects of the ideology that sustained slavery in the past30 are similar to those that maintain contemporary relations of dependence. For instance, the apartheid system that existed in South Africa until the early 1990s was seen by many as the continuation of slavery by other means.

Mauritania and Sudan remain in the news as places where slavery continues in one form or another. Both Mauritania and Sudan have complicated racial problems, even when denied by the government, tied to the trade in slaves and the impact of Islam. In Mauritania, the French prohibited slavery in 1905, but it has continued nevertheless. Racial categories have been defined around slavery, land, and power. At the top are the Beidan, the Berber/Arab, called by some as ‘white Moors,’ who own land, big businesses, power, and slaves. The Beidan construct themselves as superior to blacks and control the Abid, the black slaves either bought or born into slavery. The Abid are regarded as chattel slaves, owned by Beidan masters and exploited on land and used to rear livestock. The third category, sandwiched between the Abid and Beidan, are the Haratin, the descendants of local populations and freed slaves. They can use land given to them by the Beidan, own their own businesses, and marry and raise their children. The Haratin are not allowed to be equal to their former masters or enjoy similar social standing as the Beidan. The Haratin and Abid are collectively known as the Black Moors, and they regard themselves as an oppressed category. The droughts and economic decline of the 1970s and 1980s brought the interracial tension to a head, with various conflicts over the rights to land and payment of tributes by slaves to their masters and landlords. In the 1970s, various protest movements by the Black Moors to overcome their status were violently suppressed.

President Mauusa ould Si’ Ahmed declared in 1997 that opposition to slavery was against the spirit of his so-called democratic regime. Professor Cheikh Saad Bouth Kamara and four other leaders were arrested in the following year for so-called anti-government activities that involved the internationalization of the problems of slavery and human rights’ abuses. The government argued that the Universal Declaration of

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Human Rights did not apply to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The argument came as a rude shock to political activists and many in the world community; after all, the country claimed to have abolished slavery in 1981 and inserted many liberal and democratic clauses in its 1991 Democratic Constitution.

Professor Kamara later received an award in 1998 from the United Nations for his activist role, but his struggles and those of others have yet to transform Mauritania. Relations of dependence are established, justified by the force of history and traditions, and sustained by the dominant class in power. The freed slaves (Haratin) do not believe that freedom has given them much economic and political power, although they are no longer slaves in legal terms. Many have been granted freedom but are still required to be part of former slave estates or pay dues to former masters. And the Abid remain legally defined as slaves with masters enjoying their power.

Turning to the Sudan, the external and internal slave trade has a long history in this country. Current cases of slavery evoke conditions of violence reminiscent of the long-dead transatlantic and trans-Saharan slave trade, merits more space than most others. Slave raiding to supply external markets began in some parts of the Sudan in the late eighteenth century, doing much damage to the society at large. The wars associated with countless slave raiding expeditions and other problems have created a “memory of war and blood.” Stephanie Beswick has analyzed the dangerous psychology of this experience, “emotions that are attached to the memories of previous wars, killings, and misdeeds.” During the 1980s, an alliance of slave merchants and government officials conducted slave-raiding expeditions that were accompanied by the rape and abuse of women and children. In spite of various denials to the contrary, these expeditions have yet to end. Even today, there are still cases of ‘predatory attacks’

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33 This essay was completed before Sudan was split into two countries, North and South, because of unresolvable conflicts driven by a host of reasons, including identity politics and resource allocation.
35 Ibid., 198.
between groups, prompted by the fears associated with the domination of the south by the north, unending ethnic clashes, and slave raiding.

In 1990, the report by Human Rights Watch on Sudan was (and still is) highly disturbing. In addition to detailing a variety of abuses committed in the conduct of wars, the report devoted attention to slavery, implicating both the army and the government in episodes where thousands of Dinka women and children were enslaved and dragged to other places to work as domestic and farm labor. Due to the international exposure of the slavery cases, the Sudanese government was put on the defensive, saying that kidnapping was different from slavery, and that captive taking was part of a long history of ethnic hostility between the Baggara and the Dinka. A government controlled by the north blamed the leaders of the south for trash[ing] the name of the country. To the south, the Baggara and northerners of Arab-descent have always exploited them, capturing their citizens and turning them into slaves.

In 1996, another report on Sudan concluded that slavery was still prevalent and linked to the ongoing war. To the compilers of the report, the Sudanese government could no longer call the widespread occurrence of slavery “hostage-taking.” The denial is often expressed by those who support it, as government officials and soldiers are known to have participated in kidnapping and selling people. The situation Sudan has energized more than a few in the anti-slavery movements such as the American Anti-Slavery Group (AASG) and the Anti Slavery International. In 2001, the AASG appeared before the U.S. Congress to ask that trade in gum Arabic produced in the Sudan should stop because it was being produced by slaves, and to ask Americans and others not to buy stocks linked to oil in Sudan. The AASG also took with it to the Congress a freed slave, Francis Bok, who narrated his sufferings and enslavement in ways similar to the slave narratives Olaudah Equiano written two centuries earlier:

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39 Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African (London: Author, 1789).
…I was born in southern Sudan near Nyamillel. When I was seven, my mother sent me to the market to sell eggs and beans. I never saw my mother again.

At the market, the militia soldiers attacked. Hundreds of Arabs on horses came into market shouting. They shot people in the head. And they cut off heads with their swords. And the streets were a river of blood.

They took me and many children as slaves. They put me in a big basket tied to a donkey, and they took us north.

One girl had seen her parents killed, and she would not stop crying. So they shot her in the head. Her younger sister started crying. So they cut her foot off. I was quiet.

In the north, I was given as a slave to Giema Abdullah. He took me to his family, and he beat me with sticks. All of them—the women and children too—they called me “abeed, abeed” meaning black slave.

For ten years, they beat me every morning. They made me sleep with animals. And they gave me very bad food. They said I was an animal. For ten years I had no one to laugh with. For ten years nobody loved me. But every day I prayed to God.

One day I asked my master a question: “Why do you call me abeed? And why do you feed me bad food all the time and make me sleep with animals? Is it because I am black? My master was very angry. “Where did you learn to ask me this question?” he said. “Never ask me again.” And he beat me and beat me.

When I was 17, I decided to escape. I would rather die than be a slave.

I ran away, and I came to a police station. “Please help me.” I told the police. But they kept me as their slave and made me do work for them all day. After two months, I ran away. An Arab truck driver helped me escape. He hid me in his lorry, and he helped me to get to Khartoum, the capital.40

More suffering followed, with an arrest by the Sudanese secret police and five months in jail. He later escaped to Cairo where the United Nations Refugees Office arranged his relocation to Iowa in the United States. His story, packaged and popularized by anti-slavery groups, is one of many that have brought attention to the continuity of slavery in modern Africa.

The Anti-Slavery International has also been relentless in popularizing the atrocities in the Sudan and pressuring its government to abolish slavery. The organization has noted that the Sudanese government is not sincere, and it keeps mounting international pressure to free those in bondage and prevent new enslavement.41

The cases of Sudan and Mauritania have long attracted international attention. The two countries and various cases of human rights abuse have led to the creation of many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to attack slavery and related forms of dependency and labor injustice. Also, within the United Nations, a Working Group emerged in 1975,42 with varying levels of success over the years, to address issues of slavery, pawnship (popularly known as debt-bondage), various abuses to children (traffic in children, child pornography, child prostitution, involvement of children in warfare and criminal activities, sweatshops, etc.), various abuses to women (prostitution, genital mutilation), and the deliberate killing of people in order to sell their body parts. The new anti-slavery movements have given us a new definition of the institution of exploitation, limited not only to the ownership and domination of a person, but also to include cases of ‘forced exploitation of labor,’ the control of one person by another, and severe restrictions to individual freedom that deprive them of their liberty. In the process, indigenous people have been allowed to speak, to provide extensive data on a wide range of age-old abuses of forced labor, servitude, and debt-bondage. Various governments have been forced to respond to criticisms and challenges offered by international organizations, although not all have been sincere, using all sorts of excuses, if not outright denial, to justify various practices. The astute governments simply make promises or even send delegations to international meetings without necessarily reforming their societies.

While what is being compared to chattel slavery of old may be misleading, and while it is certain that no country in the world now relies on slavery to sustain its economy, it is not wrong to emphasize contemporary relations of subservience akin to the slavery of old. It is also important to question the ideology of free labor and how

41 For all their various efforts, see the website of the Anti-Slavery International, www.antislavery.org.
poor wages affect millions of people in different parts of the world. The desire of those who seek labor and those who seek the means to survive converge in ways that create servile conditions. Modern forms of slavery exhibit three tendencies: “control by another person, the appropriation of labor power and the use or threat of violence.” 43 A few serious forms of contemporary slavery are identified below.

First, young African girls have been shipped to Europe to work as prostitutes, later abandoned by their ‘madams’ or ‘masters’ when they are no longer active or when they become independent. An underworld economy, sometimes connected with crime and drugs, is hard to root out. Second, the rise of so-called illegal aliens in Western countries is often tied to bondage. Syndicates recruit migrants in order to exploit their labor. Afraid of the police and immigration authorities, illegal aliens cooperate with recruiters, making it difficult to arrest and punish the criminals. Third, within many African countries, young children, instead of going to schools, can be found hawking goods or working as domestics in poor conditions and in exploitative situations. “Unicef estimates that human trafficking is more lucrative than any other trade in West Africa except guns and drugs,” declared Allan Little, a BBC correspondent in Nigeria who reported in 2004 the alarming trend in child trafficking in Nigeria. He added that, the streets of Nigeria are teeming with trafficked children. Of the hundreds of thousands of street kids living rough in Nigeria’s oil rich cities, perhaps 40 percent have been bought and sold at some time. The girls are most frequently sold into domestic service, or prostitution, the boys into labor in plantations, or to hawk fruit and vegetables for 12-hours a day in an open air market. Some work as washers of feet.44

Although we are not sure that his usage of “bought and sold” is correct, what is more common is the parents collecting the wages on behalf of their children. A way of socializing children to adulthood in the past has now become an avenue to make small amounts of money for parents to survive. In Madagascar, child traffic rings have emerged to steal new babies, selling them abroad for adoption. A few parents with many


44 This was broadcast on Saturday, 17 April, 2004 at 1130 BST on BBC Radio 4 and reported on http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/3632203.stm.
children have been accused of dumping newer ones on street corners because they have no resources to take care of them. Fourth, the tradition of pawning continues in various ways. Poor people use themselves or children as collateral for loans, using their labor to pay off debts. The relationship between moneylenders and pawns is unequal, leading to gross abuses. And finally, cheap or poorly remunerated labor is a common feature in many parts of Africa.

Reparations and the Politics of Power

One of the main issues in recent years has been that of reparations, in some ways reviving some of the ideas of the Pan-Africanist ideology shaped by W. E. B. Du Bois. Since the nineteenth century, slavery and the diaspora have combined to create a black transnationalist ideology. For the greater part of the twentieth century, transnationalism was expressed in Pan-Africanism, a political movement that advocated the end of colonialism in Africa and the political and economic empowerment of all blacks irrespective of where they lived. Black transnationalism has enabled Africa to reassert its glory as the homeland, for blacks in various parts of the world to fashion their identity from African roots and the legacies of slavery, and to engage multiple ways of survival in various places. The consciousness of Africa fuels the vigorous search for the creative means to move forward and solidify a non-Western way of living. Ideas such as those of Negritude represent ways of seeking new paths in a modern world. Pan-Africanism’s connection to socialism was identifying a noncapitalist route to development, if capitalism was regarded as the source of slavery and colonialism.

The successors of slaves now demand compensation on various grounds. Some countries are being called upon to start with an apology. In making the case, activists are exposing the ruthlessness and brutality of slavery. No one can deny the violence associated with slavery, the loss of relations and friends, the horrors of the Middle Passage, and the exploitation in the plantations. Even on the ground of suffering alone, an apology is justified. But apology is very much tied to domestic politics. Where racism persists, as in the U.S., an apology is difficult for politicians looking for votes.

The aggressive demand for reparations is linked with black radicalism, most especially in the United States. African American scholars and politicians of the radical-
nationalist persuasion have called on their members to calculate the debt—that is, the principal and accrued interest—and negotiate their collection from Western countries. Treating the slave trade as a case of war, robbery, and genocide against blacks, the radical-nationalists point to cases of compensation to Jews, American Indians, and Japanese for offenses committed against them in the past. The various costs that advocates have demanded, calculated by different people using different criteria, are staggering.

In the late 1980s, Africans joined in the demands for reparations. A host of organizations emerged, and the Organization of African Unity (later known as the African Union) accepted the idea. Not only would African Americans receive compensations, Africans, too, would receive a share. The late Chief M. K. O. Abiola, a prominent Nigerian businessman and politician, adopted the cause of reparations and donated time and money to it. Reparations can never do full justice to the victims, Abiola notes, but it is a principle that “wrongs must be righted, injuries compensated.” His arguments are similar to those expressed in the United States: Africa deserves to be compensated for the brutality and losses associated with the slave trade, colonialism, neocolonialism, and apartheid. To Abiola, Africa suffered for five hundred years and continues to suffer in recent time because of “apartheid, debt burden and unequal exchange.” As with African American advocates, Abiola sees reparations as crucial to Africa’s development. “To a productive Africa,” he concludes, $250 billion in debt will be onerous but manageable. So, the solution being humbly proffered, is that reparations should take the form of massive infusions of investments in infrastructures, manufactures, machine-tools, power, telecommunications, education, health, advanced agricultural technology and support for political democracy in the motherland.

The demands for reparations have to confront the Afro-pessimist views of a continent whose tragedy can disappear only with recolonization. It was when the

47 Ibid., 234.
48 Ibid., 237.
movement for reparations was about to gather steam that some began to call for the return of colonialism. Recolonization became the antithesis of reparations. While the view is not solely his, Paul Johnson, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, doubted the capacity of many African countries to govern themselves and suggested recolonization in order to overcome problems of corruption, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and famine. In an imagined second round of colonization, independence should be off the table until the world is assured that a particular country is able to govern itself. This primitive suggestion undercuts the demands to transfer wealth to a so-called tragic continent.

**Conclusion**

In drawing this chapter to a close, I would like to make a number of points that tie the subject of slavery to contemporary realities in Africa. The connection between the past and present is not a stretch, at least not in this case. The thread is clear to see: the use of cheap labor has made it possible to build and manage states, centralize power, and accumulate wealth. Servitude is linked to power and accumulation. The slaves of old and the pawns of the present share a number of things in common: marginalization, poverty, ownership by a master, social domination, and the difficulty of redemption. The case of Sudan also shows that violence remains a defining characteristic of slavery even today.

First, the violence and criminality of the slave trade era bear close resemblance to contemporary politics and warlordism. Violence underpins the exercise of political power in Africa: in the slave trade era, it was to capture people, now it is to dominate and suppress the poor and the marginalized. Chiefs of old and warlords of the moment connect power with obtaining resources; whether it is slaves or diamonds, the two groups behave similarly. The political classes that supplied slaves are the predecessors of contemporary leaders who act as collaborators and compradors to bring together internal repressive forces and external profit seekers to prevent putting authentic development on the agenda of the state. Thus, as Africans complain about slavery and

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its legacies, we must also complain about the decadent and corrupt political leadership that promotes cultures of dependence and poverty. Those who want to help the oppressed and those in conditions resembling slavery may have to ignore the argument that the sovereignty of every nation is sacrosanct. Supranational institutions may acquire the power to deal with abusive political regimes.

Second, African governments, especially in Mauritania and Sudan, must stamp out slavery. Elsewhere, all ways in which slavery affects democratic institutions or the growth of liberal politics must be reformed. Many governments will deny a connection between modern-day politics and past histories of social stratification. Some are clear to see, as in the case of gender relations or ethnicity. Many are difficult to see and are disguised under so-called traditional practices, such as the male domination of women. Embedded in traditional practices may be relations of dependence such as slavery and pawnship, which affect the practice of politics. Traditional practices do affect what we define as political ideologies and do shape politics in ways that empower some established ‘traditional aristocracies’ and disempower families related to the poor of old. Sudan and Mauritania show that established social hierarchies and the history of slavery affect political contests at the local and national levels. Even where the meanings of slaves and slavery are contested, there are attempts by those seeking power to manipulate the definitions to gain power and exclude others.

Third, conditions that resemble slavery must be eliminated. Today, this includes practices such as child trafficking, child labor and child prostitution, trafficking in women, debt bondage, and various coercive aspects of the sex industry. Such cases continue, sometimes on a staggering scale, as part of underground economies, leisure business, and the production of goods for an international market. Moral appeals to stop servile conditions will not work, just as moral appeals did not end slavery and the slave trade. Inducement in terms of cash payments for the enslaved to become free has been tried, but the success, in both the short- and long-term, has been limited. Those who use cheap labor regard attacks on their practices as attempts to weaken them, to destroy their privilege. Child labor, like slavery, may not be efficient, but it does work in terms

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of the ability of masters to maximally exploit labor, reduce maintenance costs, and operate without sanctions. The child or the displaced prostitute, like the slave of old, may be rootless, which makes them subject to a variety of abuses. Those who treat children or prostitutes as free agents miss the connection between poverty and servility, and between servility and the ambiguous meaning of freedom in highly stratified and complex societies. Slaves were able to use force and resistance to negotiate power relations, even in cases creating independent power base and communities. Children are unable to build alliances to free themselves, and prostitutes are not likely to be able to turn reproductive power to advantage. Governments and nongovernmental organizations have to intervene to protect the weak, releasing the servile from their bondage. Access to credit and land will go a long way in preventing many people from surrendering their lives and futures to a greedy system.

Fourth, irrespective of the position one takes on reparations, I very much doubt that anyone can argue that the West owes no responsibility to Africa, if only to ensure that politics and economies develop in a sustainable manner. Involvement in the slave trade and the ruthless colonial exploitation are more than enough justification. This responsibility is not all about aid in the form of money. Even reducing the transfer of wealth from poor Africa to the developed West will go a long way in solving many problems. The strengthening of nongovernmental organizations and various social movements will contribute to the expansion of democratic space, the training of leaders at various levels, and the empowering of many in positive ways. Africa is an integral part of the world, and its problems and promises must be included in global politics and economy. The continent has contributed to the development of other continents, gaining and suffering in the process.

The negative legacies of slavery and colonialism will disappear if Africa marches toward a better future. This is possible if conditions of democracy, good governance, sound economic management, and responsible political leadership are created in a sustainable manner.

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Three examples demonstrate how African cultures are manifested in the African diaspora, including the survival of medicinal and healing practices, the rapid spread of Nollywood movies to other parts of the world; and the work of a new generation of Diaspora artists living and working in the Western world. These three and many more topics illustrate how various aspects of African culture are spreading to other parts of the world, despite the legacy of slavery.

African Medicine
The example of Yoruba gods and goddesses demonstrates the importance of medicine. Healing practices, including ideas and the uses of plants were part of what they brought with them, including divination and the incantation to make them work. Various studies have shown how Africans carried their cultural ideas to the Americas. In a recent book by James Sweet, he uses the case of Domingos Álvares, a prominent healer and diviner to illustrate how many of African ideas of healing survived and spread during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Álvares was originally from Benin in West Africa. Forced into slavery in 1730, he worked on sugar plantation in Pernambuco, and later exiled into Portugal as a prisoner. In his various locations until his death in 1750, Álvares converted his spiritual and healing power as a vodu priest into service to the needy, thus acquiring fame and prestige in the process. Curing illnesses and diseases, Álvares also made speeches and remarks that upset slave owners as well as attacking imperialism and the capitalist system. Although Sweet’s study is located in the Lusophone world, it was not peculiar to this part of the world. As he shows, Álvares’s knowledge and practices were acquired in Africa. In the Atlantic world, he had an audience, those who subscribed to his faith and worldview. In the United States, many similar practices have been noted in different parts of Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia. For example, reference has been made to Caesar’s cure for poison published in the South Carolina Gazette of May 9 1750 recorded by a wealthy slave owner, Richard Jordan, and his successors from

about 1620 to 1687.\textsuperscript{53} The remedy gained widespread fame, and his inventor, an African slave, was able to use his medical knowledge and healing power to attain freedom.

We cannot know how many Álvares and Caesars existed in different parts of the African diaspora, bringing various ideas from Africa and introducing them in new lands, not just in medicine but also in all aspects of culture. The nameless had enabled the transfer of various aspects of African cultures to different parts of the world.\textsuperscript{54} During the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, migrations moved people and their knowledge, ideas, skills, and mindsets. They were also able to reproduce their knowledge, using socialization within families to transfer what they knew to their children. As Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton show, slaves from Central Africa, as early as the first hundred years of the Atlantic slave trade, laid the basis of an African American identity, one that included aspects of religion, languages and material culture.\textsuperscript{55} And as Marie Jenkins Schwartz also shows,\textsuperscript{56} children born into slavery had opportunities, even in cruel plantation settings, to learn useful ideas from their parents, enabling cultural retention. Various aspects of the contributions to science, technology and medicine have been under explored. Botanical and food ideas were developed and transmitted from one generation to another.\textsuperscript{57} For instance with respect to medicine, we see the creativity in adapting African herbs and knowledge to new situations not just at the time of Álvares and Caesar but even today.

Healing in Africa and its recreation in the African diaspora reveals several issues: the knowledge of plants and animals, the poetic incantations to manipulate symbolism to prevent and cure, divination and ‘magic.’ No disease escapes the imagination to find an answer to cure it. Where the original plant used in Africa could not be found, new ones

\textsuperscript{53} This can be found in the archives of the Virginia Historical Society, labeled as Jordan, “Commonplace Book,” Virginia Historical Society, Mss 5: 5J7664.
were sought, as in the case of Brazil and Chesapeake plantations during slavery. Without the knowledge of science and pharmacology, there could be no medicine. Kay Moss, who examined some of the documents relating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, points to the combination of herbs, incantations and witchcraft to cure many diseases.\textsuperscript{58} Whereas these are often wrongly presented as ‘primitive,’ they demonstrate incredible knowledge, great insights into people and the forces that shape their lives, and prescriptions for many health problems as complicated as smallpox and barrenness to simpler ones such as cough. The authority and relevance of these healers have been written upon in different parts of the African diaspora to suggest that Caesar of Virginia was not alone or unique.\textsuperscript{59}

As to medicine itself, studies have confirmed the impressive knowledge contained in what indigenous ideas have created. In Brazil where African medicine and religions are more intermeshed, research has shown that the Yoruba have a profound knowledge of the uses of plants and animals to cure various ailments, minor and major. Pierre Fatumbi Verger has done the most comprehensive study ever conducted on the use of plants among the Yoruba.\textsuperscript{60} A scholar and a practitioner, his long book of well over seven hundred pages describes over two thousand remedies and practices, 3,529 Yoruba plant names, and the Yoruba names and equivalences for 1,086 scientific names. A careful observer, Verger provides dense elaboration in five forms: a) parts of plants that are used for medication, that is, the leaves, barks and roots; b) how the leaves are prepared, that is, boiled, burnt into ashes, pounded; c) how they are used internally and externally; d) the Ifa divination sign that makes the remedy work; and e) the incantations that give power to the plants.\textsuperscript{61} Verger collected his recipes from established practitioners who combined the knowledge of herbs with divination “based on 256 signs called \textit{odu} under which traditional medical practices are classified. These 256 \textit{odulu} are double signs

\textsuperscript{58} Kay K. Moss, \textit{Southern Folk Medicine, 1750-1820} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).
\textsuperscript{60} Pierre Fatumbi Verger, \textit{Ewe: The Use of Plants in Yoruba Society} (Sao Paulo, Brazil: Companhia das Letras, 1995).
\textsuperscript{61} The incantations, known as \textit{ofo}, have been the subject of an earlier book by the same author, \textit{Awon Ewe Osanyin: Yoruba Medicinal Leaves} (Ile-Ife: Institute of African Studies, University of Ife, 1967).
derived from sixteen single ones and paired, either with themselves to form sixteen primary odu, or with one of the fifteen other single signs to form the 24 secondary ones. ⁶² Spoken words expressed in the odu acquire power (ase) which makes the plant work. The knowledge of plants and signs become the ‘creative force’ that can heal and cure. He demonstrates the plants used in various remedies, linking specific ones to medicine, magical formulae and pharmacology. “The medicinal virtues and values of a plant,” concludes Verger, “are not easy to find out, because rarely is a plant used on its own. In general, formulae are made up of three to six different plants.” ⁶³ He continues: “A plant may be compared to a letter of a word. On its own it is insignificant, but when joined with other letters it contributes to the meaning of the word.” ⁶⁴ His recipes, numbering thousands, are classified into six categories:

1. 237 formulae for medicinal remedies (oogun) which tally, to some extent, with similar ideas in western medicine.
2. 32 formulae for remedies relating to pregnancy and birth (ibimo).
3. 33 formulae for “magical works” relating to the worshipping of Yoruba deities (orisa).
4. 91 formulae for “beneficent works” (awure).
5. 32 formulae for “evil works” (abilu).
6. 41 formulae for “protective works” (idaabobo). ⁶⁵

Verger points to the difficulty of demarcating the difference between magic and scientific knowledge: “This stems from the importance…given to the notion of an incantation (ofo) spoken during the preparation or application of the medicinal formulae (oogun).” ⁶⁶ As he further explains:

If Western medicine prioritizes a plant’s scientific name and its pharmacological characteristics, then traditional societies prioritize the knowledge of ofo. Countless remedies from around the world were originally extracted from plants and later replaced by chemically reconstituted drugs, which had the same curative effects on the human

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⁶²Ewe, 13.
⁶³Ewe, 16.
⁶⁴Ibid.
⁶⁵Ewe, 16.
⁶⁶Ewe, 17.
body. But in traditional societies, it is the knowledge of the ofo (incantation) which is essential, as it contains the “power-to-alter” the formula’s pharmacological effect.\(^{67}\) From the ofo, the medicinal effect of the plant is revealed. When an ofo changes, the action of the plant may also change. Verger considers ofo as definitions: “The incantations are often based on a particular reasoning being used for a particular situation or remedy. They also serve as evidence of the continuity in the traditional archive of data transmitted from one generation of babalawo to the next.”\(^{68}\)

Examining the thousands of entries in Ewe and their ofo, it is clear that there is an established knowledge of pathology. Diseases are named in various ways. Some are merely descriptive, as in diarrhea (igbegburu) and dysentery (igbeorin), with the use of medicine that requires no ofo, rituals or reference to any supernatural forces.

No society can have this rich, extensive and expansive knowledge without an understanding of chemistry, biology, and related sciences. The knowledge cannot be accumulated and transmitted without an education and socialization process in place. The consumption of the products of the knowledge requires that social and political institutions be in place to mediate interpersonal and intergroup relations. And without the means for a class to extract resources, it would be much harder for politics to function and to sustain social stratification where it does exist.

Different forms of creativity and knowledge reveal the nature of society with regard to power and control, relationships among individuals, work and leisure. References made to magic and poison may also allude to fear by those in power that those under them can kill them. Connections have been made between magic and resistance,\(^{69}\) and between slave medicine and social control.\(^{70}\) If Álvares and many diviners had power in Africa (and they still do), we can imagine that Africans with the knowledge to heal and create new meanings from new plants and other resources would also have power. If Caesar had the power to invent an antidote for poison, we should also assume that he had the power to make poison to kill. Thus, in combining both, we

\(^{67}\)Ewe, 17.  
\(^{68}\)Ewe, 19.  
\(^{69}\)Roeks, Sacred Leaves.  
see how his status among his peers and slave owners would be enhanced. The ability to create music, dance, and acquire spiritual relevance is to convert low status into social status and political agency within the community. Caesar, a contemporary of Álvares, through his discovery, the testimonies that it worked, and his consent to reveal the elements, was able to obtain his freedom in 1750 and given a moderate sum of money for the rest of his life. He was able to convert knowledge into freedom. That whites sought the means to neutralize poison was not new by 1750—in earlier years, seeking bezoar (organic materials found in ungulate animals) and ‘Goa Stones’ (substances of herbal medicine) to neutralize poison was not uncommon, drawing not a few to Africa and parts of the Indian Ocean region.

New forms of knowledge were created on many aspects of human endeavor. Knowledge circulated over a wider region, and some were carried from Africa to Europe and the Americas, as in the examples of healing and plant species, the knowledge of divination and herbs, and food cultivation as in the example of rice. Spirituality and religions have received prominent treatment in books on Candomble and Santeria by scholars and practitioners. Healing and praying were connected in religious beliefs. What they created and repackaged have served as the basis of new identities. These identities and their meanings are different from those of other races with regard to aspects of living, interactions with others, and even death. Álvares and Caeser would be confused if their remedies were dismissed as irrelevant or not medicine, or if the knowledge to cure was separated from the one to kill. And as Sweet points out, preaching and healing were also political statements that had the capacity to rupture society.

While Álvares and Caeser were two remarkable men, they probably were not alone in the knowledge they possessed, and their skills and ideas were grounded in

72 See, for instance, James Sweet, *Recreating Africa*.
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Communal traditions that originated from Africa. Today, such traditions are being revived and extended in different parts of the Western world where a new generation of African priests, healers, and diviners practice non-Western medicine in the context of African religious traditions.

Nollywood

The second example to illustrate the spread of African culture is a Nollywood production, *Virginia Is for Lovers*. A story of love and the complications of marriage, the film portrays the life of contemporary Africans in an American setting. The description on the DVD’s cover gives a summary without revealing the answers:

The issue of a man and a woman as best friends has always been on our minds. In other words can a man and a woman be close friends without being in love? Or is there any such thing as a platonic relationship. Now before you say anything please enjoy this romantic drama between Michael Collins (Desmond Elliot) and Stacey Thompson (Ginnefine Kanu) who are both raised in Virginia (United States), have been friends since childhood and had always helped each other. Now eventually how does Michael’s wife Chobis (Hassanatu Kanu) and her best friend Kim (Veeda Darko) feel about this and how it relates to their marriage, friends and family relations.

Africa is dragged into it, creating a hybridity of ideas on multiple issues: romance, marital responsibility, imagined kinship, the impact of money, etc. *Virginia Is for Lovers* is targeted to a younger generation of Africans living in the West. It is part of a growing body of work in which the signifier in black profane discourse is being rejected and replaced with something positive. A way of life, as captured in *Virginia Is for Lovers*, attempts to use a language where the range of meanings keeps to standard English usage. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is less complex, and the text lacks rhetorical strength. If signifying in Black speech is to reveal the tension in society and racial and class divisions, serious and mundane issues in *Virginia Is for Lovers* are presented in the language of a rising middle class. Africa and the experience of immigrants are not presented as esoteric, but as real, not intellectualized as a past heritage but as a living culture. Western values are not being rejected but

74 DVD, James Oddoye’s Production, Black Star Entertainment, 2009
appropriated and adapted, thereby rejecting the binary opposition between the values to be encouraged in being black and those to be repudiated by imitating whiteness. Tensions are mediated by popular culture and the market rather than by race and class. The images of the 1970s are gone: there is no revolutionary talks of the past, nor the dirty characterization of Blacks as wig-wearing whores and konk-haired hipsters.

Virginia Is for Lovers reveals how creativity can capture a moment, and allows us to compare and contrast peoples of different generations as well as the different historical eras that shape their attitudes. The black middle class represented in the creative work of the Harlem Renaissance is not the one in Virginia Is for Lovers. The rage of the class and racial wars of the past involved statements about Africa, the Atlantic slave trade, slavery, the trauma of emancipation, and the sufferings during the civil rights movement. If in the past many had to reject their origins because of the trauma of slavery, many of the present are affirming their origins. The suffering and pains of the past required confrontation with the heritage of slavery, which included accepting or rejecting Africa. In Virginia Is for Lovers, assimilation is celebrated, and the Western conception of romance is accepted. The trope of success and failure can become repetitive, as in the annual repetition of festivals and rituals, but such repetition should not be confused with the lack of theoretical sophistication or creative imagination. A film or work can be mediocre, but the repetition in its theme is not responsible for the mediocrity. On the issue of repetition, I am reminded of the statement by James A. Snead:

In any case, let us remember that, whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we are indeed not viewing ‘the same thing’ but its transformation, not just a formal ploy but also often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history.75

Virginia Is for Lovers weaves the trope of friendship and love into a repetitive cultural form, using the signifier of affection and marriage to narrate the experience of contemporary migrants.

Aderonke Adesanya’s Time Traveller

My third and final illustration is the paintings and poetry of Dr. Aderonke Adesanya of James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. If Caesar illustrates the transfer of culture and its repackaging from Africa to the Americas, and Virginia Is for Lovers presents the love lives of transnationalists, the third illustration takes us back to Africa to relate art and poetry to culture, indigenous and modern. In her most recent painting, Time Traveller, Adesanya takes motifs from different African culture groups, notably the Yoruba and Fulani, to create a complex work on mythologies that link the world of the living with the spiritual, and the environment with the people.

In this complicated work, she wades into the murky, controversial world of terrestrial travels and spatial fractures, with thoughtful lines imposed above unreadable minds and fragmented bodies. The very heart of the painting is rather intensive, highlighting the pivotal minds of a hidden he and a disguised she. The he manifests a double identity, a sort of a guru with an undefined race but invoking the apparati of the Yoruba cult of secrecy (ogboni). The staff made of iron is both a figuration and signification of power—how a metal whose production is ritualized becomes further embedded in a religious system where everything is explained in spiritual terms. Denis Williams is right when he made the statement that “Power inherent in the unfamiliar and intractable metal is to be controlled not so much by means of analyzing the process of its operation as by propitiation and prayer addressed to the orisa, or god, who has been able to tame such power.”76 Ogun, god of metal from needle to airplane, is the work of science and technology. But in Adesanya’s work, Ogun is the spirit, the god to be invoked. Artifact and mental fact become blended to reveal a philosophy.

The woman in Traveller Time is reflective, with ideas refracted from an empty space, drawing energy from the spiritualized man behind her, with an arrogant gaze into what appears to be a predictable future. In the woman emerges an elephant, a metaphor on strength, but one in which the elephant can meta-morph into a woman, and the woman, when energy is needed, sheds her human flesh to become the strongest persona

in the jungle. Her strength is not destructive, like that of the lions and tigers eating their neighbors, but of a gentle force walking quietly and merely grazing. The elephant tusk symbolizes energy, while a decorated calabash floats in air. The imagery, presented in a disguised form, may have tapped into Adesanya’s unconscious, represented in poems on women where she deploys a similar combination of Yoruba and English words to portray a strong woman who is ready to spring into action at rather short notice:

Formidable foe
Wrapped in riotous tornado

Both man and woman appear to defy gravity and her levitating to the sky (before the womb in which they are imprisoned breaks into a world under), where the mutable boundaries above seem cautioned by the subtle faded envelope opened on two wide sides. They are, for forever unclosed, becoming an ideological metaphor of the complex interplay of those overwhelming forces that shape movements. Adesanya endorses ritualistic and essentialist beliefs, thus bringing the value of African indigenous spirituality and theology back to the forefront at a time of rising Christian fundamentalism. Set in a modernist context, the man and his ritual objects are not primitive, but forward-looking, actually appearing to be intellectualizing a body of ideas. We are left guessing about the outcome of his introspection.

In previous paintings,77 Adesanya has depicted women in various activities in work and leisure, while her cartoons, running into three thousand over a ten-year period, have made many social and political statements on gender and politics. The cartoons stratify society and culture into high and low, but also create a parody of urbanized women. Her poems78 are critical of patriarchy and politicians, affirming the statement that scholarship for black women is an opportunity to make political statements about society and male domination. While drawing on the indigenous idioms, she is aware of the larger currents in the West, and seems to combine them, as in a painting of women on horseback playing polo. Amilcar Cabral, in Unity and Struggle, written at a time of both anger and hope—anger directed at the Portuguese brutalities and exploitation of his people, and hope at the possibility of a new future following decolonization—

77See http://www.flickr.com/photos/toyinfalola/sets/72157611525063119/
admonished Africans that part of the strategy of obtaining freedom is also to fully understand the positive contributions that the oppressor’s culture has to offer, and that liberation is an “act of culture.”79 Women on horseback playing polo is, no doubt, an ‘act of culture’ in a Cabralian notion of liberation.

The combination of culture and ideology represented in Adesanya’s art and poems is the signification of contemporary reality in Africa and the emerging nature of change. I think that she is searching for effective tropes of disalienation in aesthetics to transform gender relations and make national politics more representative, responsible, and responsive. Her predecessors, in framing modernity, as in the work of Ben Enwonwu,80 dealt with the tropes of modernity and alienation. If Wole Soyinka settles for Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, using him to frame an African-tragic/tragic-Africa discourse,81 Adesanya seems to have settled for Oya, the river goddess, and in her cartoons of well-dressed sophisticated urban women to frame issues of modernity. The cartoons may appear post-modernist to the neo-traditionalists, and her assumption of the possibility of cultural autonomy for women may be misplaced in view of the media being deployed to communicate her message and of the Western impact on society.

However, Adesanya is not alone in the problem of seeking cultural autonomy as a solution to some aspects of Africa’s problems, in her case that of reconciling women’s place to postcolonial situations. Great thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, and Agostinho Neto have had to address similar problems in the larger context of development and the minimization of dependence on the West. In an extraordinary essay, Professor Olaoba F. Arasanyin, also of James Madison University, has related the difficulty of creating a language policy in Africa to how colonization left Africa with “an alien political character” which makes it vulnerable to powerful pressures outside of its boundaries.82 Wole Soyinka is dismissive of the presentation of African reality in narrower forms, as in his attack on Negritude. Cultural autonomy for Africans may be

elusive in the context of globalization, just as cultural autonomy is hard for women in the context of patriarchy, indigenous traditions, Christianity and Islam.

Furthermore, Adesanya’s work seems to be advocating an agenda of liberal humanism. I use ‘liberal humanism’ intentionally and critically to point to the inadequacies of ‘liberalism’ to confront violence and inequality. The recall of past Yoruba traditions, especially the representation and invocation of Orisa, is a statement on the continuity of the past. But as we combine her paintings, poetry and cartoons, we see some acts of subversion and transgression. Her ‘truth’ is not anti-colonial, but anti-postcolonial, although I must point out that ‘postcolonial’ does not have a straightforward meaning in the body of her work. If the images can be read as ‘texts,’ the mythological patterns of figuration stress the role of modernization on women, but not in terms of any complete break with the past. The open-endedness that her creativity suggests invokes a Bakhtinian concept of indeterminacy of dealing with an ‘evolving contemporary reality’ where art operates in a “zone of contact with the present in all its openendedness, a zone that was first appropriated by the novel.”83 Her paintings are fresh, like her poetry, and the trajectory of what they represent is clearly in terms of cultural and gendered significations of the post-colonial moment.

Creativity, Politics, and Empowerment

I now want to combine and collapse the three entry points to “shift the map of innovation and reason,” the elegant phrase coined by Dr Besi Brillian Muhonja of James Madison University, to invite us to reflect on the ‘Africana world.’ I will do so in a holistic framework set in the context of changing historical eras. The first entry allows us to talk about Africanization and re-Africanization, while the second and third encourage us to talk about transnationalization and globalization.

In the African diaspora, identity emerged in the context of slavery, race and migration. The voices speaking for members of the diaspora of slavery, represented in the emergence of African American identity in the United States and related ones in

Europe, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, have had to link creativity with this context. Derek Walcott makes the connections in his well-cited essay “The Muse of History:”

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic and evaporates into pathos. The truly tough aesthetics of the New World neither explains nor forgives this history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative and culpable force. This shame and awe of history possesses poets of the Third World, who think of language as enslavement and who in a rage of identity, respect only incoherence and nostalgia.84

Walcott attempts a creative exorcism in Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays85 where a lead character, Makak, who lives as a ‘wild beast in hiding’ gains his freedom, after wandering through the landscape of oppression and subjugation, and ending in Africa where he makes a symbolic execution of all those who had subjugated and oppressed his people.

In seeking the means for liberation and emancipation, cultural and political ideas and actions found expression in black empowerment, black power and black capitalism. Whether in Brazil or the United States, Africa—a place, a home, a race, an ethnicity, a civilization, etc.—becomes central to the formation of ideas and activism, as various people become like Makak. Africa is used to capture the imagination of people of African descent. Many writers see Africa as a source of black dignity and pride. When Africa was under colonial rule, the desire to free Africa merged into a global Pan-Africanist network to free the continent, to end apartheid, and to turn the continent into the leading place of pride for all Blacks irrespective of where they lived. The Pan-Africanist agenda of creating the United States of Africa was rooted in the assumptions of shared cultural heritage and the common history of domination and exploitation by Europe.

A ‘manifesto’ had emerged by the turn of the twentieth century: all Blacks should unite to end oppression, exploitation and discrimination; they must free themselves of foreign control; they must be economically and politically strong. If Blacks outside of Africa understand Africans and vice versa, progress, it was believed, would surely come. African Americans have always been urged to be interested in African affairs, and to derive their pride from there, while Africa is advised to reach out to them to acquire skills. To cement the collaboration and the interactions, projects of cultural celebration were to be embarked upon. Marcus Garvey, one of the best known activists in the articulation of this comprehensive networking, put the unity of Black people as entering “into common partnership to build up Africa in the interest of our race.”

W. E. B. DuBois refined many of these ideas, elevating them to higher political heights. Of course, not everyone accepted that the connections were possible, as some, like James Baldwin, point to different historical struggles that have to be resolved differently:

The African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past. His mother did not sing, ‘Sometimes I Fell Like a Motherless Child’, and he has not all his life ached for acceptance in a culture which pronounced straight hair and white skin the only acceptable beauty. They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three hundred years—an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening’s goodwill.

Being caught in different struggles does not mean that the journeys are too far apart in their sources, paths and destinations. Indeed, many embarked on the ‘trip’ to Africa, even as the cynical and critical Baldwin presaged that they would not find the answers they wanted but instead more questions. One reason to start from Africa is to understand the origin and context of many ideas, the milieu that produced them, and the mindset that shapes the imagination. We can understand how ideas travel, and how these ideas are reformulated in other places. If the ideas of survival and health were linked to a spiritual universe, it is not hard to understand why the worship of gods and

goddesses would spread in other parts of the world, why Christianity would be redefined to include ideas drawn from African religions, why the use of herbs and incantations to solve health problems would not just go away, and why Nollywood cannot thrive if it eliminates beliefs in juju and witchcraft.

Not all new inventions and ideas owe to Africa, as borrowing and adaptations also occur to modify the template, to apply new technologies and concepts to older ideas, to substitute new materials for older ones that are not available or adaptable. From the very moment of encounter with the West, even in plantation economies, innovations have always been part of the negotiation of interaction and survival. In creating new products and ideas, the enslaved mixed Amerindian, European and African traditions. In colonial Africa, Africans were clever agents in translating received ideas to meet local needs. Several works have been published on the creation of an African American identity and the contributions of the enslaved to Western cultures, all providing the data about the human agency to adapt to new environments and conditions. 88 Today, such innovations continue in all aspects, from cuisine to attire, from the use of language and communication devices to using technologies to create new cultural meanings.

The possession of knowledge opens up opportunities to use capital for social and political purposes. For instance, healers and priests have always been respected. During slavery, slaves and slave masters could be afraid of conjurors whom they believed had the poison to kill, and in awe of those with the love portion to win women’s affection, and the remedies to cure. Where knowledge was a threat or became connected with resistance, 89 there were efforts to ban practitioners, conjurors, use of certain lyrics in music, herbs and poison. Those with literary skills could acquire public acclaim. If associated with radical ideas, they could be perceived as a threat, as in the case of socialist-oriented activists of the twentieth century who were labeled as ‘communists’ in order to impose sanctions on them. Celebrations, notably of funeral ceremonies, even

89 See, for instance, such episodes in Michael Mullin, Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Joao J. Reis, Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1833 in Bahia (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
turned death into victory, bluntly revealing to hegemonic power that the end would come to all and glories await the weak and marginalized in the world that counts the most—the next!

The second and third examples reveal the new currents in contemporary global forces. Millions of contemporary African migrants are agents and couriers of cultures. As constant travelers, they have enormous capital to innovate, to tap into the social power embedded in their difference. Many can be found at the crossroads of change and innovations; millions generate hybrid knowledge in all aspects of life; their skills are varied, multilateral, drawing from too many sources and ideas. Contrary to what many people think, Africans have created spaces of cultural innovation and expression all over the world, represented in scholarship, politics, inventions, music, dance, food, honor and much more. Moving back and forth from Africa represents social power in the age of globalization where voices and beliefs can be carried. By demonstrating African cultures outside of Africa, migrants become powerful agents of communication. By recreating and producing new ideas that blend African inheritances with others, they become innovators. By taking ideas back to Africa, they are brokers, agents of globalization with the skills to announce and communicate new things, some borrowed. Without the large immigrant population, there would have been no *Virginia Is for Lovers*, and without the global academic market place, Dr. Adesanya would not be at James Madison University.

We are now at a moment where the frontiers of knowledge must include the understanding of these transnational beings both in Africa and the West. Indeed, our teaching must begin to respond to what they represent. Powerful forces have submerged the African states into the bigger space of the marketplace, of invisible forces, of virtual space, of imagined spaces, and of denationalized geographies in relation to identity, authority and power. A new set of connections are derived from alternative spaces, and global networks. The ties between Lagos and London are much stronger than what people think. Both are global cities with many functions and institutions that are

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regional, national and international. The managers of the leading sectors of the economy think in terms of trans-border networks; the communication infrastructures they deploy have global outreach. So also are the ties between villages and the cities part of a regional network that connects to many other countries. The cellphone is a point of contact between all parts of the world. The cellphone, the Internet, and the spread of technology have created a more connected world where economic and social ties are very dense. The reality is that the world has become so intimately connected. The European Union is a case of creating ‘borderless’ countries where citizens travel from one country to another without a visa and where they can actually work. The Euro is a currency that almost 500 million people can use for transactions.

The intensity of migrations within and across borders (driven by a host of factors such as war, political instability, famine, persecution, social disintegration, poverty, etc.\(^91\)) have created millions of people whose nationality cannot be understood within the framework of just one nation state. Diasporas of migrants are now many, intentional and voluntary, unlike those of the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan. These migrants reflect the opportunities in globalizing cities and strong economies, while also showing the consequences of troubling politics and economies in their original homelands.

Movements, mixed marriages, and constant travel have produced transnationalists who live in multiple countries.\(^92\) As the concept of ‘home’ becomes harder to define or shifts, they can be detribalized or denationalized. They can be citizens of everywhere and nowhere. Or they can think in terms of ‘double consciousness,’\(^93\) a sense of being in one place and thinking of another place as the homeland. Consciousness can be triple or more, suggesting a notion of both mental and physical deterritorialization. Within a state, people also move, changing jobs and locations, selling their houses and changing their addresses on a permanent basis. The distance between the place of birth and the place of death can be separated by thousands of miles.


\(^{93}\) This term is borrowed from W. E. B. Du Bois, although I have given it a different usage. He describes it as “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1961): 16-18.
The understanding of contemporary innovations and cultures can no longer be limited to the peculiar identities of the local. Popular culture spreads so fast and widely. The superstars of music and sports are global icons. The cultural exchange of books, music, films and others have globalized cultures so that we can even point to elements of ‘global culture’ in consumption and leisure.

We are confronted with a set of opportunities and challenges. The marketplace is ever extending, circulating goods from Dubai to Kaduna, from Lagos to New York. As legitimate commodities spread, so too do illegal ones such as forged currencies and drugs. The use of cocaine, marijuana and other drugs is global, connecting the desire of youth in Chicago with those of Dar Es Salam. Sexual practices are glamorized and globalized. Inequalities in economies and access to opportunities and consumption are among the reasons that instigate the desire to migrate. The pace keeps accelerating. There is competition to seek places; there is competition to seek markets. A new economic elite is benefiting from free borders. A generation of transnationalist imperialists has emerged, using the markets available to them anywhere in the world to make money. The new elite sees state barriers as hindrances to market expansion.

This new elite is also developing the culture that reinforces deterritorialization. They tend to study similar economic principles in elite schools, consume similar food items in similar restaurants, watch similar movies, and engage in similar vacation culture. Common culture creates common politics in a virtual space that keeps expanding. Aspiring people try to imitate the culture of the new elite.

Globalization brings its gains and pains. There are such disasters as the spread of AIDS and environmental degradation with incalculable consequences on societies and cultures. Changing world politics impact local and global cultures. The cultural might of Islam is treated with fear in the West where it influences military budgets and the conduct of foreign policy. The rise of China is leading to discussion in Africa about

possible new forms of Asian imperialism. There is controversy on the choice between war and peace, as the strategy divided the United States and Europe during the George Bush administration. There are fears of cultural clashes and conflicts over a variety of issues. Popular markets and cultures threaten local ones. The tradition of moonlight stories cannot survive the onslaught of the television and the Internet. Home-made meals are giving way to fast food. African youth are attracted by the charms of the Western artists. Seeing what they do not like or are afraid of, defenders of tradition attack the youth for their deviations. One defender of religious/cultural values can attack the other, as in the condemnation of the hosting of Miss World in Nigeria. A panic measure can be triggered to protect against the inroad of foreign cultures as in the implementation of the Sharia in some countries (e.g., Sudan), even if there are political calculations added to the motive.

Islam will surely dominate the central attention in the West, and will continue to be of importance in African politics and cultures. With respect to Africa, a number of people will continue to argue that ideas should be drawn from Islam to replace or reform the secularist state. A few may argue that using Islam to reform capitalism may lead to transformation. The clerics will continue to insist that the best way to counter Western wasteful consumerism is to turn to the values of modesty in Islam. Regarding Islam and the West, the linkage between religion and terrorism will continue to generate resentment among Muslims who already think that they are being persecuted. Islam still has scores to settle: the humiliation caused by imperialism, the crises in the Middle East, the power of the West, etc. In settling the scores, Islam will reinvigorate itself, and various elements will align the religion to various political ideologies, from the moderate to the revolutionary.

What is the place of African migrants in Western societies in all this? First, they serve as the connectors in taking Africa to the West by way of migration, travels, exchange of ideas, cultural transmission and much more. African migrants in the West take with them African ideas, African cultures, and African attitudes. When they build churches and mosques, markets and stores, they alter the landscape. When they wear

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their clothes, they alter the marketplace of attire and costumes. No one can but notice the headgears, colorful flowing robes, caps, etc. When they speak, they enrich the language with their accents and sentences. When they talk, they show their attitude as in the loud and argumentative communication style of Nigerians.98

Second, the African migrants take the West to Africa through the same process of travel, migration, and the information highway. Following the principle of either you make it or fake it, they lend credence to the mythology that the West is a land of opportunities. Gambians who did not finish high school eulogize the welfare system in Sweden; Nigerian cab drivers in Chicago or New York describe themselves as businessmen who make money as land pilots; and Senegalese carriers of small wares in the marginalized zone of Paris call themselves business tycoons in the making. Of course there are too many stories of success, and African migrants represent one of the most successful in many places. The professionals occupy solid middle class status. Hard currencies and Western goods are sent to Africa, adding to capital assets.

Third, Africans allow us to study the activities of transnationalists and the impact of globalization. Many have created new nationalities on the Internet, as in so many ethnic associations such as the Igbo Progressive Unions. In drawing on a network of new friends, kinship has been redefined, in which the fictional performs a similar role as in the original African variant. The celebration of the rites of passage in elaborate form shows how powerful fictional kinship has become. Social parties, with all the paraphernalia of live bands, excess food and drink, gorgeous attire, show how ideas of success and public display can be transferred from Africa to the West.

Cultural presentations, while affirming difference, can also create an entry point to problems of stigmatization, racism, and ethnocentric attacks. To ultra-nationalists in the West, those who live among them must assimilate. Thus, veiling has been banned in some European countries, restrictions imposed on marriage practices, tough child-raising cultures have been criticized, activities associated with child rearing are labeled as child labor, etc. As ultra-nationalists argue, those who do not want to assimilate should leave so that the hegemonic culture is not diluted. Where Christian

fundamentalists join in the discussion, they want a country where other religions, especially Islam, will have limited role and significance.

Fourth, the migrants complicate the notions of the state and nation in Africa. They can be from Ghana or Nigeria but the power of such states is curtailed in dealing with its own citizens. For many of them, the states mean little. They would rather focus on their ethnicities which they consider important since they represent building blocks for identity and by which they formulate associations. Their towns and cities are also important, since these are where they build houses and are buried should their bodies return home. And their parents and relations do count, but not the state. Those who are firmly committed to ethnic identities have even called for secession.

Finally, the migrants widen the discourse on race. Of paramount importance in private discussions is the topic of race, which they confront through daily realities with ordinary people and by institutions and structures of society. Racism can be both overt and covert, open and disguised. There are two dimensions: the first is specific, the second general. The specific one is on the collaboration and conflicts between continental Africans and African Americans, two separate identities united by color. The bridge between both is weak.

As to the general, Africans are used to the politics of ethnicity and religion in Africa. As cruel and exploitative as the colonial system was, the majority of Africans outside of South Africa read about racism and apartheid in textbooks and from stories told by a dying generation. In the West, they face that of race which they may understand or misread. Thus, it is not unusual for Africans to regret exile, to present exile as a condition of shame, to express disillusionment. Where some had gone to Europe or America looking for quick success and opulent living, they may become disappointed, seeing the promises of high culture and prestige as a mirage. Migration dreams might become dampened, unfulfilled, as they experience difficulties or alienation. Disappointments may lead to trauma, painful feelings of profound cultural


100 Toyin Falola, Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).
dislocation, mental agonies, among others. The very suspicion of their presence can generate venal reactions. Encounters with the homeland may produce suspicions in which migrants feel a sense of loss in all spaces—a being neither here nor there, an African who cannot relate to Africa nor the West. Not being African Americans, they may not be black enough. When they are black enough, the narratives of their experience are reported by others, narrators who feel neither pain nor anguish.

Racism, like ethnicity, can attach categories to people on the basis of difference. In the case of racism, on the basis of color which is then associated with deficiencies in intelligence, trust, efficiency, and ability. Whether in racism or ethnicity, the invention of difference, real (as in different color or different location) or imaginary (as in the crude determination of intelligence) and the values attached to that difference are to achieve a set purpose. One is to obtain and keep privileges of wealth and power. Thus a group in power can resort to cultural and biological difference to separate itself from others and then argue that those who are different are inferior. Second, the division enables the use of violence to create and sustain divisions and privileges. In racialized societies, attitudes and exercises of ethnocentrism and xenophobia are robbed of guilt, and the deadly apparatus of violence can be visited on the under-privileged race. Albert Memmi, a sophisticated analyst, uses the concept of ‘ethnophobia’ to characterize what I just called ‘attitudes,’ saying that biological differences are astutely deployed to ground social and physical assault and hostility.  

Racism then becomes an alibi for domination. For Africans who leave Africa because of the problems of ethnicity, they have to confront another reality of cleavage: racism. They may have exaggerated the cleavage, attributing their own inadequacies and limitations to it. Or they may be dealing with structures and institutions that impose boundaries. Many are successful, so successful that they also generate envy.

The movements of people and global interactions will continue to instigate discontents in politics and cultures. Uneven global development will mean that rich and poor people will create different cultures, that those who feel excluded from resources will grumble and formulate resistance cultures. The production and manufacture of

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goods will impact the environment, most especially forest depletion, which in turn might lead to rural-urban migrations. Population increase and urbanization will produce new urban cultures. Marginalized people will produce expressions of disappointment in words and actions. Such political expressions will empower ethnic movements and religious associations, thereby allowing a limitless number of organizations and millions of people to have allegiances in opposition to the state and such supra-state organizations as the World Bank.

**Conclusion**

One conclusion unites all the three entry points: creativity has an agenda that overcomes any legacy of slavery and racism. Various expressions are connected with identity. Self-definition enables the rejection of imposed ones, changing the paradigm of negativity to the positive. Self-definition gives power to color, and supplies the energy to fight stereotypes, humiliations, and rejection. Creativity puts breaks and checks on the process of ‘deculturation’ that encounters with others can produce, enabling us to revalorize and reappropriate elements of cultures that have been discarded. Where religion and spirituality are involved they allow beliefs to be used as cultural therapy.

Creativity provides the opportunity to create a counter discourse to hegemonic representations of blackness. Be they artists, singers, or poets, creativity allows Black people to fight back with disdain, anger, and rationalization. They provide evidence of the civilization of the past, as in works by W. E. B. Du Bois and Cheikh Anta Diop, and evidence of the possibilities of the present.

Creativity preaches the need for dignity, an identification with Blackness, produces criticism of racism and dehumanization, and gives nationalistic support for the emergence of powerful black nations. Creativity announces success and pride; and it puts on stage the richness of black cultures, the talents and skills of writers, poets, artists and others. As the works are enjoyed and appreciated, the masters and the audience all become worthwhile collaborators in the project of progress and race uplift.

Creativity refutes racial prejudices and affirms blackness. The large body of work in black literature and African history combines to say that the black race is not infantile and inferior, that black people are intelligent and talented, and do have a common
identity, a rich heritage and a long history. Not denying the contributions of other races, Black scholars assert that all races, nationalities, and ethnicities have their geniuses, make original contributions to world heritage and civilization. Rather than support an ideology and bureaucracy to facilitate a monolithic system, the originality expressed in Black creative endeavors points to diverse cultures and shows us the way out of totalitarian and repressive modes of thinking.

Creativity is a statement that blacks are beyond labor, that is, people defined just in terms of manual exploitation, irrespective of the economic system. While some do have character flaws (as with all groups of people in any part of the world), the race cannot be stereotyped as foolish and mediocre. Richard Wright attempts in *Black Boy* to say that even the characterization of being foolish can be rejected by small acts of violence, and that ambition and identity should not be caged. As Wright attempts to aspire to greater heights, he is pulled back by negative characterization, his humanity dehumanized, his personality depersonalized, until he can stand it no more:

I could not make subservience an automatic part of my behavior. I had to feel and think out each tiny item I brought to the whole of my life. While standing before white men, I had to figure out how to perform each act and how to say each word. I could not help it. I could not grin. In the past I had always said too much, now I found that it was difficult to say anything at all. I could not reach as the world in which I lived expected me to; that world was too baffling, too uncertain. 103

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*104 adopts a similar connection of creative use of violence for individual liberation. Disengagement and withdrawal or silence have been represented as yet other ways out, in countless blues music, religious tracts, and poems. Even Richard Wright gestures at the use of this strategy as he withdraws deeper and deeper, agonizing that: “I grew silent and reserved as the nature of the world in which I lived became plain and undeniable; the bleakness of the future affected my will to study.”105

I am reminded of the warning by Frantz Fanon about the need to avoid intellectual dependency. What creativity has done to many poets, artists, filmmakers,

105 Ibid., 181.
etc. is to meet this Fanonian injunction, although there are also of course also too many examples of mere imitation. As new knowledge, objects and ideas are created, it becomes much harder to ridicule representation, to say that others must always speak for oneself. The monologic frame of universalism gives way to a dialogic form of diversity which, to cite Michel Foucault, “ultimately matters, a discourse against power, the counter-discourse of prisoners and those we call delinquents…”

As the vibrant Nollywood industry has demonstrated, Africa is a major site of creative innovations. Whether it is Candomble in Brazil or Blues music in the US, we see examples of creativity in all parts of the African diaspora--abundant, limitless, boundless, vibrant, and energetic. European domination of Africa did not succeed in killing the music and dance, the stories and festivals, the aesthetics, etc. They have continued in various forms and reinvented into others. Migrations have created new opportunities. The characters in the *Virginia Is for Lovers* seem to be echoing an old statement by George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* where the individuals belong to wherever they are, but without forgetting their homeland in both the subliminal, psychical and physical connections they still maintain.

Creativity, in whatever form it is expressed, is not politically neutral. It is identity seeking, defining oneself and creating the boundaries of difference and meaning. Identity asserts the self—the individual, the nation, the ethnicity, the religion, the race—all with a goal of attaining recognition, visibility and purpose. There have been literary schools and devices (such as Negritude, for instance) to generate pride for blackness and practical devices to bring creative minds together to generate unity (e.g., Festival of Black Arts and Cultures). In the musical talents of such figures as Mariam Makeba, Michael Jackson, King Sunny Ade, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Hugh Masekala, Asa, Sade, etc, Ellison’s ‘invisible man’ acquires visible names. In the leading actors and actresses in Nollywood, LeRoi Jones Clay has become not one thunderbolt but

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many thunderbolts. In Nelson Mandela, Julius Nyerere, and Barak Obama, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* has now become a man, the epitome of power, dignity, and nobility.