

# LIVING IN PARADISE?: AFRICANS IN AMERICA<sup>i</sup>

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- “Slavery was a war. A war against African culture, especially against the structure of the African family. This war has not ended.”<sup>ii</sup>
- “The hunger that brought me here is not a hunger for knowledge. It cannot be. What knowledge is here when all the learning is a ritual for blindness?... I am here because I am a factor. A factor in our history. A factor in our destruction.”<sup>iii</sup>
- “Africa is an abyss of mystery. Come too close to the edge and the mystery swallows you... Africa is slavery and slaughter, river blindness and poverty”.<sup>iv</sup>
- -I am an American, a black American, and I feel no connection to this strange and violent place.<sup>v</sup>
- “exile is heaven and hell” Femi Ojo-Ade,<sup>vi</sup>

## Abstract

This essay deals with the trauma of exile and the current exodus of Africans, particularly the young ones, desperately in search of a better life in the West. The United States (almighty America to one and all), is naturally the biggest magnet and Africans are there in large numbers. Various experiences and psychological conditions are dealt with here, such as living in limbo (the case of "illegal aliens"), living a lie (issues of the materially fulfilled not being able to at the same time live as full-fledged human beings in the racist, "civilized" society), and facing the dilemma of race and culture (the case of Africans living with African Americans who are encouraged by mainstream society to consider themselves as having been "saved from savagery," starting with their ancestors carted away in the belly of those beastly slaveships).

The conclusion of the researcher is that, notwithstanding the myriad problems that Africa represents and presents for many in economic bondage, it is still necessary for the African to FEEL and LIVE as an African - the only viable way and manner of establishing and promoting his/her humanity in a global village that incessantly and resolutely places Africa and Africans at the bottom of the ladder and on the periphery of the globe.

## Introduction: Paradise, Past and Present

This is the new millennium - the age of exceptional progress, the advent of the global village - when humanity, at the zenith of its development, is coming together to create a

new community of equals on a planet that has succeeded in solving all its problems. Yet, we do not need to think for one second before realizing that it is all a tall tale being told by those privileged enough to be past and present masters of the Village, nay, the plantation, where certain peoples are treated as slaves and servants, peripheral peons imprisoned in the penury of pauperization and the perpetuation of an inferiority punctuated by the color of their skins, not to forget their origins.

Of course, the identity of these underlings is an open secret. They are from Africa: cradle of the human race, origin of humankind, center of a civilization of which we should be proud. However, those realities have been more or less obliterated by negative images that almost everyone has come to accept as the only truth of Africa. Given the cynicism associated with the superiority complex of the masters, it is not surprising that the negative picture of Africa has attained the level of absolutism. To that I must quickly add the internalized inferiority of the neo-colonial African masters bearing white masks over their black skins. It all adds up to an image of shame and sorrow. Africa, molested and manipulated by monstrous megalomaniacs masquerading as messiahs. Africa, stripped naked and stolen blind by the so-called civilizers with their mission of murder and plunder and materialistic exploitation. Africa, masturbating in warped memories of, as it were, her myriad myths. History reveals the maze of contradictions carried over from past to present, in a cycle of stagnation misnamed freedom. It suits the oppressors outside as well as the the home-grown tyrants to foment the string of lies upon which the people are encouraged to build dreams that are merely mirages and nightmares. In short, in the African Diaspora, the abolition of slavery was concretized on the shores of second-class citizenship; as for the African colonies, the shadow of independence was

outstripped by the substance of neo-colonialism. Africa, neo-colonies camouflaging as nations; dictatorships pretending to be Marxian or, at best, epitomizing democracy; hell hoisted on two false legs, masquerading as heaven!

No wonder millions are desperate to flee. For those too young to know, it may be worthwhile to nudge our memory, to be nostalgic for what used to be “the good old days.” First of all, African ancestors of centuries ago were forcibly carried across the Atlantic on ships named *Friendship*, *Peace*, *Harmony*, and all sorts of sham words that contradicted the heinous crimes which Europeans and certain African collaborators perpetrated against humanity. I do not wish to be involved here, in the controversial debate of identifying the culpable in that holocaust; however, it must be emphasized that then, as now, the white enslavers’ *civilizing mission* of savagery was aided and abetted by African bastards. Present-day neo-colonial masters determined to sell off Africa have continued in the infamous tradition of the African collaborators of white enslavers. These servants of “civilization” (and I like to draw attention to the irony of this banal terminology) line their pockets and pad their image as world-renowned, eminent personalities.

What has changed between those centuries of dehumanization and death is that Africans are now willingly migrating into slavery in America and Europe. However, this was not the pattern in the post Trans-Atlantic Slave trade period. In that era, Africans did not see America as the land of opportunities. In fact, as recent as the post-independence decade, America was considered a second-tier country in comparison to England, France, and even the Soviet Union. People cast aspersions on Yankee swagger without substance, and with the experience of the slave trade still in mind, everyone snickered at the

savagery of the wild, Wild West. Indeed, those who travelled abroad at the time did so basically for a short season - for business, education, or pleasure. Most Africans went abroad to obtain the legendary Golden Fleece and often returned home, to the joy of family and friends, to contribute something tangible to nation building. Those who went to study abroad were usually sent off with honor and dignity as unofficial but conscious ambassadors of their people. While abroad, they worked hard, counting the days until their return to respective homelands. While abroad they sought out other African brothers and sisters and formed a community of African enthusiasts, in the spirit of Pan-Africanism.

Most were proud to be Africans, before being a Nigerian, or Ghanaian, or South African. They were convinced that the future of Africa rested on a united front capable of standing against all elements of oppression and repression emanating from the imperial West. There was also a demonstrable evidence of pride in nationhood. With regards to Nigeria, it was seen as a nation (and one hardly thought then of the contradiction implied in that word) with great potential. Nigerians in America stood tall and repulsed any attempt by anyone to discriminate against or dehumanize them. They were quick to remind anyone that their home was heaven on earth, to which they would return immediately after completing their studies. One resonant voice from that glorious past is that of John Pepper Clark (now, Clark-Bekederemo), whose scathing condemnation of American racism and its superiority complex remains evergreen in the aptly titled book, *America, their America* (1968). As a journalist undergoing a short-term stay in America, Clark refused the paternalistic and hypocritical mien of most American experts in charge

of his program. He rebuffed the patronizing attitude of those who paid his way and therefore thought themselves to be masters of the modern plantation.

Pepper Clark's text reminds one of another pungent commentary on almighty America, Ayi Kwei Armah's novel, *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972). Modin, the hero, is an intellectual with a degree from an Ivy League college, one of those institutions of excellence reputed for training the best and the brightest of American society. He is also a man passionate about Africa's future; he realizes that his Western education is but an affirmation of his alienation from his African roots and responsibilities to his people. He asserts that intellectuals are "the privileged servants of white empire" (p. 161). His profile is very much like that of another African student, Samba Diallo, tragic hero of Cheik Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1963) who studied in Paris. However, the distinction between the two is that the latter gets sucked into the belly of the "civilizing" monster. In the heavily metaphoric text, Diallo, instead of learning the ways of the vultures in order to better protect Africa against their fangs, transforms into a carcass-devouring ally. In contrast to Diallo, Modin recognizes his ambiguity, and decides to do something about it by joining the revolutionary train back in Africa. Although his action does not solve his problem, he at least learns the rules of the game and the gamble of the characteristic propaganda of the powerful, who are always ready to present *their* way as the only viable way, as well as the hypocrisy of those harboring hate in their hearts of stone. He resignedly states that America "is a graveyard for my spirit. Not mine alone, ours. The only people who survive here are white, and they have accepted themselves as mere bodies, killed the spirit in them, or put it at the service of insatiable bodies" (p. 159). In addition, he pinpoints the materialism couched in the language of democracy,

freedom and rights, within a system embedded in the Darwinist credo of the survival of the fittest and the attendant egoistical push for supremacy. Modin soliloquizes:

But why stay [in America] when things are so destructive? Greed, my friend. The climb after privilege. Studying for degrees. Degrees separate the hustlers from the damned. What do degrees prepare a person for? (p. 156).

Interestingly enough, many in subsequent generations of sojourners in America do not go in search of the Golden Fleece; they are going for gold, just as those Olympic athletes ready to win by hook or crook.

Nigeria was a source of pride to her citizens before the oil boom with its double edge impact: a blessing and a curse, on the nation. To be a Nigerian in America was to be the scion of kingdoms with glorious histories, of course, fraught with useful lies peddled by even your ignorant friends. The naira once exchanged for almost twice the U.S. dollar, even at American airports. Shops gladly accepted the money for purchases, and storefronts carried statements of the naira's viability in neon-lights. Travelers' home return was indeed a guarantee. Now, many of those who returned in those glorious days regret their decisions, especially when they recall that they had established residency in America and refused all entreaties from employers or associates, lovers, and friends, not to return to their homeland.

### **Exodus Into Exile: From The Sublime To The Ridiculous**

What changed the situation? It is an open secret that the trouble started with the downward turn in the economy, visionless leadership and aberrant management structures, wanton corruption and the subsequent devaluation of the naira. Nigeria's independence that was to have been a window of opportunity to realizing the dreams of sovereignty and actualization of developmental objectives, turned out to be a mirage.

Independence gradually became synonymous with incompetence, stagnation, institutionalized corruption, and dictatorship. I have addressed a series of these themes in my novel, *The Almond Tree* (2000), in which an aged man reviews life in the colony and post-colony, and concludes that the past was better than the present. “Outrageous viewpoint!” one might be tempted to say, but such expression of cynical hopelessness must be understood within the context of a country where the value for human life has grossly depreciated. A country where an old man who has worked all his life for the sustenance of a society where everyone is supposed to be free, and happy to belong to. A nation of forward-looking people, suddenly realizes that his/her people are “slaves” of neo-colonial masters from within, and that s/he, old and wretched, cannot even be guaranteed simple respect for his person. The new and improved life in the nation is a scenario of the ridiculous and downright disastrous. Constructive criticism is muzzled, or murdered, for fear that it might reveal the rot within the dictators’ soul. The press is proscribed or prostituted. Education is comatose or confused; shallow and shoddy; shamefully superficial as the avant-garde of privatization prepares the way for substituting their ego-tripping symbols for the institutions constructed through the people’s sweat and blood. Indeed, the self-made messiahs are sure of the illogicality of their reasoning that darkness is light; that retrogression is progress- in the almost four or so decades of military dictatorship, and the Nigerian-styled democracy!

The exodus or, more precisely, the spirit of it, which began years ago, has now gone completely out of control to the extent that the Nigerian government has instituted campaigns against “brain-drain.” Different committees and commissions have been mandated to find ways of curbing the trend. I would rather leave that task to the *experts*

who, naturally, must relish the unique opportunity to *dialogue* and, maybe, simultaneously source for funds to eliminate debts preventing them from adequately discussing and resolving the national problem. Perhaps, it is a sign of that peculiarly Nigerian virtue of making a mountain out of a mole-hill, that special sessions have to be held to explain the simplest situation: people are hungry. They are suffering. Caught at a dead end of despair, they are desperately in search of succoring which (should one be surprised?) the fathers of the nation cannot give them. It is not just a matter of brain-drain. It is an all-encompassing dilemma that cuts across class and other social compartments.

The notion of study abroad is thus lost in the overwhelmingly nauseating sense of dehumanization, visible on nameless faces seeking answers to questions of which they know not the source or significance. Everybody would like to leave without an inkling of where, or how, or when. Meanwhile, the new colonizers of the land are using this widespread desperation as a tool of propaganda, declaring that anyone thinking of flight lacks patriotism or commitment. In normal times, one would agree that it would be unacceptable to run away from home, however, if home became hell, only a mad person would stay. That, indeed, is the dilemma.

America is fully aware of the deplorable conditions of life in many African countries and this realization is arguably one of the reasons why the Green Card Lottery program was instituted. While there is a principle discouraging runaways for economic reasons, the authorities does not want anyone to forget the urge to climb up to paradise. The green card lottery is one of those programs that propagates and promotes the image of the paradise of everyone's dreams: a flight to freedom or a descent into another den of

despair? The choice depends on particular situations and aspirations, and one's perception of home, happiness, and indeed, life. Certainly, the sublimity of past voyages is lost already and, perhaps, forever too. Before one leaves the airport here at home, one already has a feeling of beginning an uphill task- the beggar treatment meted out by the airlines, giving the impression of doing one a favor. When one presents herself as a prostitute, every ugly fool will rush to feed their fancies for a pittance. It is the story of Nigeria, a country blessed with abundant essential resources, both human and material, but rather than run its own airlines, insists on farming it out to foreigners. So who is to blame?

Let me return to the fate of the traveler headed for the metaphoric paradise. At stopover points in Europe, s/he feels even worse as racism begins to rear its ugly head: one's passport is scrutinized as if a virus or a bomb is hidden in it. Finally at her/his destination, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, s/he comes face to face with paradise, symbolized by its skyscrapers and its steel and stultifying sense of supremacy, suggestive of one being marked out as an alien from the jungle.

### **Africans in America: Myth And Reality**

I am currently writing a collection of short-stories on Africans, particularly Nigerians, living in America. I daresay the stories are largely pathetic and tragic. The title is, *Dreamers*. As you may imagine, dreamers too often find themselves in a nightmare from which they cannot, or would not like to, escape. How many of those still dreaming of escape into American nirvana would believe that their families and friends, fortunate to reach the 'Promised Land,' have not been able to truly find happiness? There are examples of people living meaningless lives marked by the exigencies of materialism and survival. This category of people lowers their standards to no standards at all, in order to make ends meet even as the end continues to seem endless and unreachable. They arrive

in paradise with pride and qualifications to contribute and enjoy the fruits of their labor, only to realize that their quality is rated as the color of their skin. They who never knew failure and never for once believed that they were inferior to anyone, got to America to become taxi drivers slaving behind the wheels from dusk to dawn.

\*\*\*Many of us living in America cannot and will not tell the truth for various reasons. Some of these experiences of the fortune-seeking Africans in the U.S. are kept from the knowledge of people at home for different reasons: some are outright ashamed to face and discuss the reality of their failure. It is better to let those at home continue to dream, so as not to dampen their faith in an elusive future. Besides, who would believe that such things happen in America? And the original dreamer likes to enjoy his position of privilege. Perched on his paradise mountain, he looks down on his poor people, smiling like a god in his splendor. From time to time he sends remittances, and at his occasional visit which must be very brief, he showers the people at home with all manner of gifts. The beneficiaries are family members and sundry persons who are oblivious to the length of time and the number of work hours he put in to get the funds to buy the goods. Little did they know that he started preparing for the visit months ago, scratching and saving, incessantly toiling in tasks that none of them would, in their worst nightmare, agree to do. Besides, it is true that some do not work honestly for the greenbacks they come flinging round at home. The American media would actually try to convince the public that all Africans, and in particular Nigerians, are 419ers, identity thieves, credit-card scammers, and fraudsters, from birth to adulthood.

Let me mention two points of interest in the African's existence in America: racism and the relationship with the African American. My intention here is to explore

and explain the African experience, to determine its essence, and to suggest how Africans as aliens in “paradise” can make their lives meaningful. With respect to race and racism, I quote the words of an African American young man who visited Africa some years ago, Kevin Gordon: “I am a human trapped in a black man’s body. I am a black man trapped in a racist society” (*Not Yet African*, p. 283). To that I would add another quotation from W.E.B. DuBois, the Pan-Africanist exiled in Nkrumah’s Ghana where he died in 1963: “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, p. xi). As I have shown in the critical text, *Being Black Being Human* (2004), the latter statement is very relevant for this new millennium. The African who has never left home cannot quite grasp the whole idea of racism. S/he cannot adequately comprehend the silent and subtle denigrating statements about Africa, and the stench and strength of the oppressor. The rage and the rebellion, or the submission and the subservience of the oppressed (the African immigrant). The actions and reactions, all entangled in a web of mixed messages that make you feel it is time to depart, or die. Race is the burden borne by blacks. It is that ambiguous concept through which a hierarchy of colors is created and cultivated, notwithstanding content and quality of character, reminding one of the exhortations of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on that memorable day in 1963, at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. It is only blacks that are constantly described with an ever-changing series of epithets. Whether hyphenated or not, the nomenclature underlines the hybridity in identity, the double consciousness, indeed, the confusion in character which the mainstream society has always encouraged in the children of Africa, taken away to America.

In 2005, the general tendency in America is to claim that racism belongs to history, and that The Constitution has definitively solved the problem. The contrary is true: the country is obsessed with issues of race, and still suffers from the disease that once served as springboard for slavery, and now serves as powerful instrument in the hands of supremacists unwilling to accept that *colored people* could be their equals. Take the example of lynching, a turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup>-century punishment for any black man that had the temerity to look at a white woman. Today, worse punishment is meted out to some that are not looking at anyone, but simply alive and walking on the road. The 1999 case of a man in the small town of Jasper, Texas, comes to mind: James Byrd was picked up by three white supremacists who tied him to their truck which, they drove on a dirt road, dragging along his body as it disintegrated piece by piece. Their joy-ride, some have said, was just a question of inebriated ignorance. As a rule, no distinction is made between Africans and African Americans, although we must be careful to note that the similarity is applied largely in cases of racism. Thus, both groups are victims of racial profiling, a systematic surveillance and harassment of black motorists and anyone present on the streets. One could be the target of police shooting practice for no other reason than blending with the color of the night, and supposedly reaching for a weapon which, in fact, is the key to one's apartment, as happened to an unfortunate African, Amadou Diallo, in New York in 1999.

Part of the process of downplaying the disease of racism consists of the encouragement of hybridity in various forms. As with the evolutionary process of naming black (Congo-Negro-Colored-Afro-Black-African-American, euphemisms for sambo-coon-pickanniny-nigger!), multi-ethnicity has become the norm to which everyone is

latching as if their lives depend on it. Multicultural, multiracial America, populated by mulattoes, would thus be the new society of their dreams. It takes but one serious look to understand the myth: those that have continuously hit their heads against the steel wall of rejection in white paradise, now see a way out, by claiming and proclaiming their other side, superior to the negroid, that is, African, inferior roots.

In short, the configurations of multiple ethnicities are embedded in a history of rape or shared rapture. One can trace the experience from plantations' masters making babies with house slaves, with the offspring enjoying certain privileges due to his color shade; to the post-bellum era of pacifist interracial cohabitation that made babies destined to *pass* into the mainstream, allowing their black background disappear; to the revolutionary era of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where *I'm black and proud* became the anthem of black nationalism, even though the question of shades stood unresolved (see Spike Lee's movie, *School Daze*). Now, that the Civil Rights Movement is deemed as history, past, dead, forgotten, or remembered only as celebrated reference to a struggle whose result categorically proves progress in "paradise," many are elated to seek and celebrate their multi-whatever affiliations. For what purpose, one might ask? Sinister, or sincere? Progressive, or retrogressive? At whose benefit? Or at whose behest? Whatever answers are given to these questions, the fact remains that black remains firmly rooted at the bottom of the ladder. And it all goes back to Africa.

However, before delving more into the African experience, it must be noted that Blacks are making progress in America. Nigerians here at home definitely tune to CNN, and watch other stations on cable, when and where there is light, or a generator. They know about the black superstars in sports and entertainment. They must have watched the

other Sunday's Oscar show (February 27, 2005), hosted by a black entertainer, Chris Rock, with Blacks winning both the best actor (Jamie Foxx) and best supporting actor (Morgan Freeman) awards, respectively. These victories have come in the heels of the earlier ones by Denzel Washington and Halle Berry. Hollywood, one would be tempted to say, is turning black! The meaning of these events would unfold in time. For now, the significant point is that the winners are not just black, but American, African American. In his acceptance speech, Jamie Foxx urged the audience: "Let's keep the African American dream alive!"

### **Africans and African Americans: Convergences And Divergences**

I have for long been intrigued by the relationship between Africans and African Americans. As a prelude to a future conference, I have invited four colleagues to the college where I am employed to participate in a roundtable discussion on the theme that I consider of great importance to the destiny of all of Africa's children anywhere in the world. In the past, I edited a collection of essays, *Of Dreams Deferred, Dead, or Alive* (1996), in which Africans gave their perspectives on African American writers and their notions on Africa. The forthcoming gathering intends to expand the debate of that text, as it brings together two Africans and two African Americans, to offer views from both sides of the divide. For, whether we like it or not, there is a divide, a deep one, a dangerous one, that may either break or make our destinies in a world that refuses to fully accept our humanity.

Partially as a consequence of what may be called *the Roots syndrome* (Alex Haley's much celebrated and commercially successful 1977 book and television series on slavery, which led to many a return in search of roots, particularly among African

Americans), African Americans have been visiting the continent and writing about their experiences. We shall take a quick look at a few of them, in order to hear their voice, their message, on Africa and Africans, and their relationship to them. In his *Native Stranger* (1992), Eddy L. Harris writes: "From a distance, I might look African. My skin is dark; my hair is dense and curly. My nose is broad. In many ways the similarity ends there, for the external and the internal do not always match" (p. 35). While in Africa, he feels more at home with German and American tourists with whom he had much in common. He found himself realizing that something as subtle as culture could mean infinitely more than something as overt and obvious as the color of his skin (p. 69). In his many encounters with Africans, Harris never fails to underline differences and distinctions and, ultimately, among children swarming around him and begging for candy, he reveals the deepest part of his self: he and others feel "like gods" (p. 75). The subtitle of his book is another tell-tale: *A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa*. It reminds us of Joseph Conrad's infamous *Heart of Darkness* that depicts Africa as a mysterious jungle where man and monkey commingle in barbaric bliss.

Harris's text dovetails perfectly into that of another brother, Keith Richburg. His *Out of America* (1997) is the story of his sojourn in Africa as the correspondent of the *Washington Post*. As he moves from one disaster-area to another, witnessing the madness of dictators and the death and disease constituting the regular diet of the helpless populations, he quickly decides that he has nothing in common with Africans, save the color of his skin. As with Harris, Richburg heads to South Africa in search of hope, only to find that it is White South Africans who offer the glimmer in the dark. His assertion of choices and actions reveals the content of his character: "Since I was only there for brief

trips, I ended up spending most of my time in Johannesburg in the comfortable and familiar air-conditioned shopping malls, the trendy restaurants of the north suburbs, and at the dinner parties of white friends and colleagues debating whether or not the country was set to slide to hell under Nelson Mandela, its first black president” (p. 194). Here is a black man in South Africa empathizing with white apartheid masters, feeling safe among them, and sharing their fears about the evil lurking in the mysterious souls of blacks. He realizes that he *is* an American: “I knew then, on that long drive sitting next to a South African, that while in America I may sometimes feel alien, it is here in this place, the land of my distant ancestors, that I truly am the alien” (p. 223). He concludes: “I am terrified of Africa. I don’t want to be from this place. In my darkest heart here on this pitch black African night, I am quietly celebrating the passage of my ancestors who made it out” (p. 233). There it is: a black American (note that Richburg refuses to use the African epithet for himself) is exceedingly happy that his ancestors were enslaved, that is, saved into civilization from Africa’s savagery.

Certainly, there are other visitors not caught in the civilized confusion that essentializes Africa’s present dilemma into a culture of savagery. For example, Lynne Duke’s *Mandela, Mobutu, and Me* (2003) is a newswoman’s African *journey* (the word is significant, not an encounter with darkness), a genuine attempt to understand the present by carefully examining the past, and a sincere effort to know the people and their culture. This book may be read in conjunction with another, *Not Yet African* (1998), by Kevin Gordon who calls his text *a journal of discovery*. His frontispiece quotation, borrowed from Simone Weil, would serve the present discourse well: “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” At the end of his journey,

Gordon writes: “I now feel 100% African. I love everything African. The sights, the sounds, the people...” (p. 281).

An eye-opener of a remark, a word of consolation, naturally, when one notes the attitudes and assertions of not only other African Americans, but many Africans living in and outside Africa. A great number of those exiled in “paradise” are very quick to circulate every negative piece of news about home. People learn of events long before those living back in Africa who, besides, may not be interested. People are enjoying the beauty of highway technology, outstripping the plethora of places of worship clogging Nigeria’s main commercial artery. For instance, one wonders how many people knew of the recent act of patriotism by leaders of the land past and present who congregated at the capital’s airport with a cake for the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration of one of their number. Unfortunately, the weather, one of those elements of nature to which dictators cannot dictate, refused to cooperate in the show of shame and sham. A fellow Nigerian remarks thus, and I did seek his indulgence to quote this: “The cabal that ruined the nation is enjoying life... at the expense of the masses. Unfortunately those of us hiding in the West know the stories of their excesses more than their direct victims who have limited access to the print and electronic media... From our vantage point, we read and groan” (Tunde Olusesi, February 27, 2005). Unlike that young man, many others read and grin, congratulating themselves for escaping from hell.

Now, the relationship between Africans and African Americans living in America is more often than not a source of sorrow. The title of a newly published book by Godfrey Mwakikagile, makes the point quite clearly: it is a matter of *misconceptions, myths, and realities*. The misconceptions and misunderstanding are based upon myths. African

Americans accuse Africans of selling them into slavery. To counter that heinous act, they claim that the best and brightest from Africa were sold (read: saved) from the jungle into civilization. For their part, Africans accuse African Americans of being more American than Americans; for being uneducated, uncouth, and unfriendly. They claim that whites treat them better, and make them feel more welcome, than do African Americans. This latter claim is particularly widespread among intellectuals. It is not unusual to hear an African employed in a historically black college complain that his black brothers and sisters are deliberately alienating him. On the contrary, those on white campuses claim that they are treated with some dignity.

Wherein lies the truth in this mutual dilemma? Note that myths, emphasized for long, and modified for special effects, easily transmute into perceived facts internalized by victims of evil. In the final analysis, the mind becomes poisoned and friends become foes, and family, source of strength and community, is given the image of a pack of hounds snapping at the slaves and ready to pounce and devour them. The explanation for those myths taking root can be found in the identity of those making Africa's history and deciding, or manipulating its destiny. Europe and America have the power and the voice. They are in control, gladly sowing the seeds of confusion and self-hate among their ex-slaves and ex-colonized. Imagine this statement: *If there were no sellers, there would be no buyers* [of slaves].

In 2004, American National Public Radio did a survey on immigration. Let us quote from the overview document: "Overall, many non-immigrants believe immigrants may be changing the nature of the country in a way of which they do not approve... Two-thirds of non-immigrants say America should have a single culture." Of course, the poll

paid attention to race, and gave data on the opinion of African Americans. We are told that Blacks and Whites often share the same views on immigration, such as: the government is not doing enough on illegal immigrants; immigrants are taking jobs from Americans; legal immigration should be decreased; immigrants are hurting the economy. African Americans are twice as likely as whites to seek the decrease in immigration, and in the belief that immigrants are taking away jobs from them. A higher percentage among them also believes that the worst kinds of people are being allowed into America, and that illegal immigrants constitute a danger.

While one may have reason to doubt the viability of a process whereby only 1,900 people were interviewed, one can make certain interesting observations. The general discontent about immigration certainly has to do with the trauma of the 9/11 madness when, out of the blue, a symbol of American supremacy was shattered. With regards to the views of African Americans, they would appear to coincide with the attitude of indifference towards Africans. It is remarkable that, in present-day America, there is no African American lobby on behalf of Africa, similar to the commitment of Jews for Israel, for example. When one recalls the past cooperation between diasporic and continental Pan-Africanists, and the work of the likes of W.E.B. DuBois, Kwame Nkrumah, and Wole Soyinka, one remains nonplussed by the current inertia within the black community. There is enough blame on both sides of the Atlantic to build a skyscraper of shame and sorrow; of missed opportunities for constructive engagement and exchange. The general atmosphere of selfishness and self-centeredness called democracy and modernity is making matters worse. Just as the post-civil rights generation of African Americans is immersed in the myth of rights without attendant

responsibilities, second-generation, young African immigrants are learning to Americanize their souls. America has successfully sold itself to one and all. As for blacks, one is tempted to believe that there is in place a deliberate program to set Africans against African Americans, so that they may not come together meaningfully. Thus, we have the clash of cultures, as if there were an American culture; as if skin color were all that linked Africa's children together; as if all those signs of continuities witnessed in our whole existence and experience were myths.

## **Images of America**

The question thus arises: why do African Americans, in their large numbers, feel so indifferent to Africa's plight, and why are they stuck with the epithet of *African*, often hyphenated, even as they attempt to shed what would amount to a burden? The answer is found in *America*: the most powerful nation in the world, the most developed, the most progressive, not to forget other superlatives, up and down the ladder of qualitative appraisal, it attracts all and sundry to its shores and almost bar none, each comer is sold on the Dream, seemingly already concretized by the very fact of arrival. And, the Dream never dies; for, it is presented as something being constantly sought after, with hope eternal, even if the seeker is living in a world of dreams where mirage makes for mistaken identity, and tomorrow may never come.

America is protective of its image of supremacy and superiority. Its power feeds upon that superiority complex, a certain swagger combining brute force with a material(-istic) content envied by many ashamed of their own background reputedly marked by endemic backwardness. When one thinks of African comers, one is astonished at how easily they forget that their society in its own right was once the center of a superior civilization and a culture coveted by invaders that borrowed or stole without acknowledgment. Many of us have internalized the myth of inferiority (savage, barbaric, beastly) to the degree that we too, are rather quick to condemn our home as hell, not in the sense of passage towards heaven but as a dead end of disease, destruction, and death.

Nonetheless, something in America makes people, from time to time, wake up to the reality that they may be condemned to live, or rot, on the periphery. Everyday events in America do, indeed, prove that it, too, can be hell. Some of the news is simply unbelievable. Not only are there serial killers in that country, children murdering school-

mates, and arsonists torching homes belonging to blacks. There are also demented AIDS-carriers deliberately spreading the deadly disease. One serial killer, president of a church council and an usher, has just been caught after three decades; he has confessed to six of thirteen slayings. Pedophile priests preying upon trusting, innocent boys, have become stars of various shows of the absurd as the church is trying hard to save its seemingly sanctimonious, filthy face. Newspapers are full of such stories, and yet no one is claiming that those are the symbolic faces of America.

No one ever says the whole society is rotten. The usual explanation is that crimes are committed by certain sick souls considered as an aberration within a society of right-thinking, clean-living, civilized people. Notwithstanding the spike in cases of homicide and suicide, both possibly symptomatic of the trauma of living in “paradise,” notwithstanding the hate and the hypocrisy, many an African would still prefer America to Africa. The fact is that America works. Bureaucratic efficiency, high-tech competency and the volition to keep moving forward; accountability, pride in one’s profession, reward and recognition for excellence, not for incompetence and corruption, such are the components of a capitalist system where you can drown your sorrow in the comfort of gadgetry and the phantom of freedom capable of dazzling the most resilient cynic. Freedom, justice, progress: these are sometimes mere words, but on many an occasion, there are signs that they can be meaningful. Criminals are caught and dealt with, sooner, or later, even though certain cases remind one of exceptions to the rule. For example, think of Martha Stewart, superstar of home design and decoration. She was jailed for criminal insider-trade activities on Wall Street. She is coming out of jail with her popularity soaring to the skies. Prison, one would say, is making her potentially half a

billion dollars richer as plans are afoot for a new television show and fashion lines in her honor; a movie will definitely crown it all. And, as you can imagine, she is white. Still, one can say that in America, cows are not sacred; they are caught and slaughtered and consumed by hungry human beings in need of their succulent meat for survival. Fathers and mothers of the nation do not feed fat on their children's blood and sweat; instead, they strive to be responsible in the full knowledge that they are always under the microscope of public scrutiny. The public is called upon to pay for services; in return, you have a right to demand full returns for your money, or else the irresponsible individual or group is made to pay back. Even as racism continues to rear its ugly head, there is reason to point to some light along the dark alleys of the nation's soul, reminiscent of the Third Mainland Bridge at Lagos, Nigeria.

I have mentioned success by African Americans in sports and entertainment. At the level of politics, a black woman, Condoleezza Rice, has risen from the post of National Security Adviser to that of Secretary of State, a post vacated by another black, Colin Powell. Power to the people! Many would shout, throwing caution to the wind. Unbridled joy, one must note, however, has never served us well. Witness the umbilical cord of colonial mentality firmly attaching so-called independent peoples to the masters from the West. Witness the amnesia and inertia inundating the Africans and African American souls alike, leading them to believe that they have overcome the troubles and persecution which they suffer, whereas the global village continues to treat them as aliens. For all intents and purposes, Condoleezza Rice, in a vein similar to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, is African American by accident, but American by design.

## **Conclusion: Home, Sweet Home**

It is characteristic of all human beings to aspire to improve their conditions and circumstances, and distance themselves from whatever diminishes their dignity. However, literature presents it as an African phenomenon. It is believed that only Africans run away from their homelands in search of the legendary greener pastures. Not only the past, but the present –being mismanaged and mangled and massacred by the new masters on the block- is smeared by such filth.

For my conclusion I shall borrow the title of my very first novel addressing the nostalgia and nausea of home, the pull to return and the pressure to run away. Quite often, those that remain question the returnee's rationale for venturing back to a place they consider as hell. They cannot understand the need for basic human respect and dignity, the desperate desire to feel the warmth of life glowing in a simple smile -real, not plastic- on a face battered by misery. They cannot understand why someone fortunate to live in the center of civilization would wish to risk getting crushed in the cauldron of corruption and ineptitude in which they are imprisoned.

Yet, somehow, one has the funny feeling that they do understand, but that they refuse to, in order not to take at least some responsibility for the mess and morass. Not too long ago, Nigerians had the privilege and pleasure to travel anywhere, and they were welcome. Certainly, freedom of movement is a cherished right and nothing can beat the possibility of going and coming. Coming, one daresay, is natural, because, in spite of all the tragedies and the trauma bogging down the spirit and soul at home, one can neither wish away the reality of roots, nor walk away from family rooted in the homeland.

The debate about home will probably never be resolved, because it is too complicated, and too convoluted for comfort. Home is where the heart is, they say. How

about if the heart is stone-cold or home is real hell? You can never go home again, say some sadists. In the contemporary context where home is almost a concentration camp ruled by “zombies,” that myth might have the ring of truth to it. One must insist that home is where one’s humanity exists and thrives. A clear distinction must be made in choices, between those that were snatched away from their land and culture centuries ago, and those who now scurry away shamelessly in search of something present at home, but seemingly absent due to the unpatriotic deeds of political? prostitutes and pimps.

Exodus into exile happens in other places, including America. At the height of the Great Depression in the 1930s and the post-war era of the 40s, African Americans saw Paris as the City of Lights, where freedom reigned. James Baldwin, the famous writer, was one of those that followed their dream for rights, equality, and justice. After a long sojourn, he and others realized that the image of Paris was bloated by the desperate wish of the victims of American racism. Baldwin returned home and was inspired to write: “I am not certain that anyone ever leaves home. When ‘home’ drops below the horizon, it rises in one’s breast and acquires the overwhelming power of menaced love” (in *The Washington Star*, January 1, 1978, p. C4).

Love of home, pride in our identity and heritage, those are African qualities that one cannot forget. The hopelessness of the present cannot be but a passing phase. And hope is not dead. As that young African American traveler, Kevin Gordon, states: “The African spirit is indomitable. Children can be taught. Fixed ideas can be changed.” He continues, recounting “the unbelievable hospitality and love and caring and family and beauty and nature that I have been lucky enough to witness. I meant to recall stories of

hope against hope and happiness in the midst of adversity [...] quiet endurance and strength of character, politeness and respect for tradition, warm handshakes and smiles. Friends hand-in-hand” (p. 281).

To those words I would add others, by my late friend, colleague, and translator, the Brazilian Ieda Machado Ribeiro dos Santos, who used to insist that one must not, cannot, afford to despair about Nigeria. Having spent two years in Nigeria as visiting lecturer at Obafemi Awolowo University, she saw in the country and the people Africa’s and all black people’s hope. She read my poetry collection, *Exile at Home*, and commented thus:

I dream of the day when you all go back to Nigeria and to our home fertile with nature’s riches and full of happy people committed to our home and more. We all shall see the miraculous dawn in the cradle of world’s culture, the roots of the human race, the maker of marvelous myths.<sup>vii</sup>

A Brazilian proverb says, “A esperança é a última que morre.” Hope cannot be allowed to die, particularly when the exiled do not wish to return home in body bags, or be buried in a possibly segregated cemetery, forgotten, and far away from home.

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## **Endnotes**

- i (Public lecture delivered at Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria, on March 10, 2005)
- ii John Henrik Clarke, in Carlos Moore et al., eds., *African Presence in the Americas*, p. 74
- iii Ayi Kwei Armah, *Why Are We So Blest?*, p. 160
- iv Eddy L. Harris, *Native Stranger*, p. 266
- v Keith R. Richburg, *Out of America*, p. 227
- vi *Exile at Home*, p. 8
- vii personal letter to Ojo-Ade