

Back-to-Africa', 'Double Consciousness' and the African Diaspora: Confronting the Myth and the Reality in Ghanaian Fiction

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What is Africa to me:

Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his father loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?
Countee Cullen, "Heritage"

Abstract

*One of the most persistent debates about Black consciousness and Pan-Africanism has been on the attitudes of diasporans to Africa and of Africans to (returning) diasporans. This article critically examines the issue of the eternal connections between the continent of Africa and people of African descent in three Ghanaian works of fiction—Kofi Awoonor's *Comes the Voyager at Last*, David Oddoye's *The Return* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising*—and comes to the conclusion that the (re)connection between continental Africa and the African Diaspora is beset and mediated by formidable geo-political, cultural and historical barriers and, therefore, still in a state of flux.*

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Introduction

The rhetorical questions posed by the African-American poet, Countee Cullen, in the epigraph above in 1925, echoes of which resonate loudly in the works of Phyllis Wheatley, W.E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Alex Hailey, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and others, are as relevant today as they were at the time. These sentiments are encapsulated in DuBois' theory of "double consciousness"— "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1903:45). How this operates, whether as theory, concept or practice, is what is explored in the fictive universe of the three Ghanaian texts under scrutiny.

According to Berry and Blassingame (1982:398), very early in the history of slavery,

Black Americans retained a strong sentimental and historical nostalgia for Africa. Even while black Americans took pride in the accomplishments of the ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians and insisted they were black, they recognized that the vast majority of Afro-Americans had been transported from the West Africa coast. They exulted in the black kingdoms of Songhay, Mali, and Ghana, which developed in the Sudan, and those of Benin and Zimbabwe... Although one can identify traces of African languages, religious activities, arts and crafts and kinship attitudes in black-American communities, that is less important than the recreation of African ties.

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of men like the Ghanaian Chief Alfred Sam, the Jamaican Marcus Moziah Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois who stoked renewed interest in Africa. In the case of Du Bois, apart from his numerous writings on Black culture and politics, his actual relocation to Ghana in 1960 marked a watershed in the debate about the place of Africa in the consciousness of the African Diaspora. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, inspiration was drawn from Civil Rights activists such as Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammed and Martin Luther King

Jr., as well as from works including Cheik Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* (1974), Alex Hailey's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) and Molefi Kete Asante's *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980).

A major destination for the African Diaspora is Ghana, due to the concentration on its coastline of the slave forts and castles which were the points of departure for millions of slaves into the New World and other parts of the world (Dantzig 1999). The Cape Coast and Elmina castles, in particular, have become grottos, archives and museums where hundreds of Africans from the Diaspora converge every year to confront their history. Added to this is the annual Pan African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST), a cultural and historical event which since its inception in 1992 has been drawing to Ghana people of African descent across the world.

Conceptualizing the African Diaspora

The term Diaspora was traditionally associated with the Jewish dispersal, but is now used in Cultural Theory to cover a wide range of territorial displacements through force such as indenture or slavery, or voluntary emigration. According to Michael Payne (1988:144),

Recent formulations have stressed not only the complex ties of memory, nostalgia and politics that bind the exile to an original homeland, but also sought to illuminate the lateral axes that link diasporic communities across national boundaries with the multiple other communities of the dispersed population.

The African Diaspora is best defined in the above context because it has taken multiple directions over the last three to four hundred years, configuring into a mutating, fluid and complex historical, political, economic and social process cutting across time, space, geography, race, class and gender. As Di Miao (2000:368) points out, the history of the African Diaspora is quite different from the history of any other diasporan formation; it “does not consist of merely one people, but of several peoples coming from many geographical areas, speaking a variety of languages,

praying to different gods, and belonging to diverse cultures.” His views are shared by Hamilton (1982:394) who notes that as a social formation the African Diaspora is conceptualized as “a global aggregate of actors and subpopulations differentiated in social and geographical space, yet exhibiting a commonality based on shared historical experiences conditioned by and within the world ordering system.” Characteristics identified by Hamilton include the historical dialectic between geographical mobility and the establishment of “roots”; resistance and political assertion which translate into what he terms “creative actions of psychocultural and ideological transformations; social networks and institutional dynamics.”

In Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), the African Diaspora, referred to as the “Black Atlantic,” is an imaginary geography of widely dispersed communities with shared histories of crossing, migration, exile, travel and exploration spawning hybrid cultures. This translates into a new spectrum of displacements, revivals and reconfiguration of identities and traditions that characterize the contemporary global cultural landscape.

Comes the Voyager at Last : Ancestral Faces

When *Comes the Voyager at Last* opens, the central character, MacAndrews, who later renames himself Sheik Lumumba Mandela after converting to Islam, talks about going “home” to Africa and being with “my people” and “touching the motherland” (7) because he seems to be tired of:

the impotent myths of my land of sojourn, the legends of Negrohood, of my flamboyant ancestors who worked the land, tall African giants of unremembered savannas not aware of pain or degradation, men whose only claim to humanity seemed to have been...their signal endurance record under the whip, of men who took refuge in the good book and actually believed that they too, as God’s children, will be given brightly colored robes to cover their nakedness on that glorious judgment day (80).

He recounts his family history, a history that cuts broad swathes into the general history of African-Americans, so that the story of Lumumba Mandela becomes the story of Africa in America. It is a story that encapsulates the struggles of a race which wants, sometimes, to ‘escape’ to the motherland, Africa. Lumumba Mandela’s story begins from the time his ancestors set foot in the New World, through the Civil War in which two of his ancestors fought, via Emancipation and Reconstruction to Freedom. It is a story of a people discriminated against, used, disused, abused and consigned to poverty, disease and unfulfilled dreams. That is why he is irked by the clergyman who constantly reminds them of their duties to Christ and the Church that kept their ancestors alive in a strange land. Looking back at the history of Africa-Americans in America, he wonders where the Christian God was when his people “tottered on the collective verge of annihilation [...] condemned to an eternity of suffering in other people’s vineyard?” (18).

Lumumba’s Pan-Africanist credentials are not in doubt either. He has been involved in the struggles of African-Americans in America. Not only was he present when the Black Civil Rights activist, Malcolm X, was assassinated on February 21, 1965 in Harlem, but also he was one of the members of the original Nation of Islam who split from the group to go along with Malcolm X and the Organization of African-American Unity. His consciousness of Africa certainly has its genesis in the political career of Malcolm X, a major Pan-Africanist icon:

After his famous trip to Africa following the split, Malcolm used to speak about Africa as the true home of all black people, the land of our ancestors which was rising up again. He spoke of how Africans looked like us, how we in America have been “brainwashed by centuries of slavery and the feeling of inferiority” (81).

No wonder Edgar Wright (1996:171) describes him as “a rather unconvincing, inauthentic rendition of the 1950s black American experience—a pot-pourri of Richard Wright, Malcolm X and James Baldwin.”

Once Lumumba sets foot in Africa to fulfil his dreams, we follow him every inch of the way; we listen to the pulses of his inner self and go through the motions of his spiritual reintegration within the African cosmos. It begins with a complementary education on Pan-Africanism from his African hosts. He is given a lecture on Fanonism by one of his Ghanaian friends, a seemingly overzealous scholar whose whole life is consumed by the spirit of Franz Fanon and the African revolution. Lumumba's real initiation into Africa, however, comes in the form of a spiritual and psychic induction. In a night club, the Red Rose, the third narrator, a flimsy disguise for the author, meets Lumumba, who in a brawl stabs several people. To flee from the surging crowd and the law, the narrator takes him to his home village. It is here that the spiritual dimension of the novel unfolds through the enactment of a series of rituals of re-engagement with the past, although the circumstances under which this spiritual reunion happens are a little farcical and initially unconvincing. Obi Maduakor (1994-92) describes the scenarios as magical realism, noting that "Awoonor reconnects Lumumba to his slave past by means of dream and flashback and he uses magic and fantasy to telescope this dance of cosmic harmony," a claim contested by Petro Deandrea (2002:27) on the grounds that:

The magic of Awoonor's novel is too oneiric, mediated and personal to be grouped under such a category. Sheik, for instance, has a recurrent dream about a funeral procession changing into a chain gang, an obvious hint at the unnamed narrator's captive experience [which] occurred centuries earlier. The parallelism is strengthened by some events that they both witness, but there is nothing more to suggest a conspicuous presence of the supernatural next to the real.

Deandrea agrees that the novel "attempts to evoke the collective unconscious of a whole race through its lyrical dimension," but considers the Afa priest's recognition of Lumumba unconvincing. He describes it as an "over-exploited stereotype", perhaps, with reference to Alex Hailey's *Roots* or Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (where some market women mistake Maya for someone sold into slavery in Keta long, long ago). What Deandrea fails to appreciate is that the architect of the spiritual reconnection of Lumumba, the narrator's uncle, is an Afa priest. As Afa priest, he is situated between the mortal and

the immortal, between the divine and the temporal, between the tangible and the intangible, between the here-before, the here-and-now and the hereafter. As custodian of the supernatural, he straddles the esoteric realms as visionary, prophet, sage and teacher. In his interaction with mortals, human communication and experience beyond the mundane and secular becomes a synthesis of the real and the magical. It is with this extra-sensory authority that he operates as an Afa priest. Only he and his kind have the trained eyes to see what ordinary mortals cannot see (Bascom 1969; Idowu 1973). In this context, it is not surprising that he sees Lumumba and immediately recognizes him as “one of those people who left us long ago” (112). By virtue of the sacred knowledge only he possesses, he explains the inexplicable through recourse to the parable of the ants in motion:

You see those ants there? You see how they walk in a file, their rank closely knit? But anything can break their ordered march, smash the discipline and the progress of the march. And when that happens, there is chaos, confusion, destruction and death... But another time, one day, the ants will return to the rank, to the discipline of the tribe and the orderliness of the march. That becomes more important than the chaos and the disorder of the earlier times. (112-13).

This parable serves as a prelude to the proclamation of kinship connection between the diviner and Lumumba. With his gaze probing set on Lumumba, he says: “Look at those hands. Look at those eyes. If he had been just a shade darker, I would have told you who he is. And if I meet him in a strange town I’ll call his name, nay the name of his grandfather because he comes from our house.” (p. 113).

At any rate, one must not easily dismiss this “over-exploited stereotype.” Anyidoho (1989:39) tells the story of an African-American woman who, armed with her ancestral family name of Kwei Nortey, managed to trace her roots to Ningo, near Accra, and recalls how when she walked into that original house in Ningo, “she had the uncanny experience of walking into a house full of several dead relatives from the other family back in the United States”, for the faces “bore the unmistakable identity of relatives back in the States.” Going by Lumumba’s experience, we could argue

that Awoonor combines the real with the fantastic by creating a mythical and epical framework in which the diasporan returnee is filtered through a process of exile, conflict, liminality, consciousness, return, rediscovery and reconnection. In the context of that framework, not only are the relics of ancestry or belonging and the scars of separation reconfigured in physical identity, but also they are engraved in the collective unconsciousness. In this realm, trance, dream and fantasy become (sur)real channels for rebirth and reconnection.

Thus, Lumumba's experience at the end of the novel combines the physical with the spiritual dimensions of reconnection. As an ardent witness to the ritual performance of the Afa diviner, the throb of the medicine drums, the songs of women and the accompanying dances celebrating and commemorating his 'return', and as one chosen by a young maid for a husband, he becomes one of them in spirit. It is in this village of people close to nature, steeped in folklore and myths, that Lumumba discovers the real Africa and his kinship and connection to it. The spiritual undercurrent of Lumumba's African experience in a remote village looms large when placed against his other more mundane encounters during his one-year sojourn in Ghana. Apart from telling his life story and a bit of African-American history, it is not clear what exactly he did for the year. Yet his experience in Ghana is enough to redefine his whole being and his sense of place and belonging. This is what he confesses to at the end of his visit:

A year in Africa. And tonight I am going back to America. There is no feeling like the home going feeling that I hear grips people who stray away from their homelands. It doesn't feel like I am going home. Just like returning to a place you used to know very well. Or not very well either. But a place you carry in your memory, a place built into an edifice of joy and sorrow [...] A place where you walked in your own footsteps hearing the footfalls of folks before you, where you ate and drank your meager fares and bitter waters because you had no other choice (7-8).

However, *Comes the Voyager* ends inconclusively; Lumumba does not indicate whether he wishes to return to Ghana or not, let alone relocate there.

The Return: A Tarzan Mentality

The Return tells the story of Prince Nii Kojo Dadensroja who was separated from his future wife, Queen Ensinaa, when he was sold into slavery by his younger brother and shipped to America in the C18th, at the height of the glory of the Azanta Kingdom, a fictional name for the former Asante Kingdom. This story is told over and over again as part of folk memory in the family of the Goldsmiths, an affirmation of the idea that African oral traditions are central to understanding African-American cultural traditions and Black culture (Niane 1982). The protagonist, Jason Goldsmith, is a successful businessman whose company, Goldsmith Industries, specializes in aerospace engineering and computer networking security systems, with subsidiaries in the US, Canada, Europe, Southeast Asia and Australia. On a trip to the Ivory Coast in a bid to expand his business to Africa, his private jet crashes on a wooded mountain somewhere in the forest regions of West Africa. The site of the crash happens, by some coincidence, to be the heart of the age-old Azanta Kingdom which Jason Goldsmith has heard so much about. He and his crew are rescued by the local militia and sent to the court of the King of Azanta. It is here that Jason Goldsmith receives the shock of his life: he is recognized as the old Prince Dadensroja—a replay of Deandrea’s “over-exploited stereotype”. However, unlike Awoonor’s Lumumba, it does not take a diviner’s eyes to recognize Jason as someone from the old stock. A look at his chest reveals the royal sign of Azanta—a revelation that sends Princess Ensinaa, eponymous descendant of Queen Ensinaa, screaming. Consequently,

The guards rushed to Ensinaa’s side. She pointed in shock at Jason’s chest and they went over to look. There, perfectly etched on his chest was the ancient royal sign of Azanta, two threes hovering above each other like a figure of eight lying on its side, called “Gye Nyame” in the Akan language. The guards stood thunderstruck and then as if pushed down by a powerful force, they fell on their faces as one man and prostrated themselves before Jason who had now sat up in consternation (122).

The story is that before Queen Ensinaa died, “she prophesied that Prince Dadensroja would come from the skies to reclaim the throne of Azanta”

(128). Incidentally, Jason possesses the “majesty,” “height” and “physique” (122) of the prophesied messiah. By convention and logic, “as the direct descendant of Prince Dadensroja, and having the birthmark of the Royal House of Azanta, Jason automatically inherits the Golden Stool of Azanta and is the rightful king of Azanta” (127). It also means the end of the rule of the priests who seized power and ruled with an iron fist fearing that Prince Dadensroja would one day put them out of power. This puts Jason on a collision course with the present ruling class. It is a government marked by brutality and blood-letting; a government in which the Chief Priest would sacrifice anyone who challenges or poses a threat to his authority. In its depiction of autocratic rule, as well as in terms of its (time and place) setting, the narrative alludes to Jerry Rawlings’ PNDC military dictatorship, and generally, the many other military governments on the African continent. In this sense, the text’s postmodern and postcolonial inflexions become obvious. Presumably, Jason’s messianic calling entails the overthrow of the old oligarchy.

Oddoye’s Jason Goldsmith falls outside the orbit of the Africa-Diaspora reunion schema. Firstly, he is not the typical African-American who, like Sheik Lumumba Mandela, feels hemmed in by the stranglehold of the American socio-politico-economic system and who wants to escape that bind, if only temporarily. He is a wealthy businessman and part of the American aristocracy, effectively cushioned against the economic travails of his African-American counterparts. Secondly, he finds himself in Azanta purely by chance. Thirdly, in spite of all his initial pretensions Jason, is an expatriate fascinated by the ‘otherness’ of the Azanta jungle and society, as is his brother Jesse and their white companions who appear to be ‘tourists’.

As already stated, he set off for Africa as a businessman looking for new spheres and spaces to expand his business empire and not as a political messiah. He had visited Abidjan several times on business trips but had never developed any connection with this country beyond observing its semblances of an American city with well-appointed bazaars and boulevards. He demonstrates the ignorance of a first-time visitor to Africa and is obsessed with pedestrian Euro-Western perceptions and myths about Africa. Put another way, Jason and his crew come to Africa with

a Tarzan mentality. Their greatest fascination is not with the people and their culture and social organization, but with lizards, worms, monkeys, snakes, crocodiles and lions and the African jungle, defining features etched indelibly in the Western mind. Jason does not feel any sense of belonging because he is not in Africa to reconnect in the first place. The only time he professes his belonging is when he finds himself in danger of being killed, when he says:

This is my ancestral home! [...] My great, great great grandfather, Prince Nii Kojo Dadensroja, was unjustly sold as a slave to America. Today, my brother Jesse and I, his descendants, and our friends through our unfortunate accident, have found ourselves in beautiful Azanta, *a place we never believed existed* [my emphasis]. Shall we be treated as aliens and put to death because we are the unfortunate victims of unfortunate circumstances? The blood of Azanta, your blood, runs through our veins. You must right the wrong done to Prince Dadensroja so long ago by letting us go as free men! (140)

When he talks of Azanta blood running through their veins, the hollowness and insincerity of this claim reverberate across Africa to America: he seems to be merely engaged in a parody of what has been said of his Azanta ancestry. He is not interested in the new royal status conferred on him. All he wants is the freedom to go back to America (as an American citizen) where he *rightly* belongs. This is confirmed when he and his friends finally make their escape to the Ivory Coast: “Slowly, they made their way to the United States Embassy. They had never been happier to see the *emblazoned crest of the Embassy* [my emphasis]” (185-6); “happier,” not because of their escape, but for having touched the soil of America, symbolized by the Embassy.

It is only when, upon their arrival back in America, Jason and Jesse recount their ordeal to their family, that there is a reorientation regarding the full import of their experience in Azanta. Jason and his family decide to return to Africa, to Azanta, to re-enact the spiritual and historical bonds that bind the Goldsmith family to this Kingdom, and also to bridge the gap between the fairy-tale Azanta and the ‘real’ twentieth-century Azanta. But it must be borne in mind that they return as fugitives, aliens

and pretenders whose claims to a blood relationship must of necessity be proved beyond every reasonable doubt. In this case, Jason must prove his citizenship through a contest with the Chief Priest in *Adowa*, *Kpashimo* and *Agbadza*, three well-known traditional Ghanaian dances. The importance of this dance contest is that it signifies some education in and induction into traditional African culture. The three dance forms mentioned are significant not merely as the shuffling of feet to sounds and drums, but as total expressions of cultural literacy. Thus, after much tutoring, Jason “began to know the joy of being in total control of the dance, to be able to express his history, his present, his future and his very being in the totality of the African dance and ... inspire his people with it” (222). Eventually, he masters the dance and wins the contest against Lord Ason. It is only at this point that he is accepted as a citizen and an overlord of Azanta; only then does he feel one with them. His acceptance speech amplifies this new orientation and status:

Chiefs and elders of the people of Azanta [...] my family and I have been deeply touched by the warmth and love shown to us here in Azanta. For us, it is a renewal of life, a straightening out of the tangled but never forgotten web of our ancestry. It is an enduring affirmation of the greatness of our people, and an enriching of the dynamic root of our common heritage. As King of Azanta, I shall do all in my power to protect our cultural and traditional institutions as well as promote the economic progress of our people. Because of my global business interest however, my family and I will not be able to conduct any necessary business that may directly need the King's attention. I have therefore, on the advice of the council of chiefs, appointed Lord Otu...to act as regent during my absences from Azanta (227).

If the recognition of Lumumba Mandela as an umpteenth generation slave by the old Afa priest in *Comes the Voyager* seems intriguing and implausible and makes sense only because of the interplay of ‘magic’ and realism, the recognition of Jason Goldsmith as the reincarnated Prince Dadensroja of the Azanta Kingdom is even more intriguing, given the fortuitous circumstances surrounding it. In both cases, the recognition and reintegration weigh more on the side of ceremony than substance. Jason's eventual crowning as the substantive King of Azanta looks more

like the crowning of an *nkosuohene* (Akan) or *ngogbeyifia* (Ewe)—honorary or ceremonial chiefships which have been conferred on a number of diasporans for their charity work in Ghana, including singers Isaac Hayes and Rita Marley.

There are a number of thematic and artistic dissimilarities one can draw between *The Return* and *Comes the Voyager*. The most notable is that, whereas in *The Return* there is an initial hostility towards Jason, in *Comes the Voyager*, Lumumba is embraced without hesitation. In terms of narrative, *The Return* lacks the deep philosophical and psychological texture of *Comes the Voyager*. In the latter, the prose-poem interludes by a faceless and disembodied narrative voice which acts as a psychic and mnemonic backcloth to the text gives it a certain lyricism which also connects the past to the present. As Sackey (2000: 367) rightly observes, the narrative structure of *Comes the Voyager* is modelled on Awoonor's first novel, *This Earth, My Brother...*, which is a “medley of forms and intense, tight sequences of poetic prose alternating with more open stretches of realistic narrative” now and again broken by “shots of running commentary, all moving sometimes forward in time, sometimes backwards or in circles, and, at yet other times, operating outside our accustomed historical time-scale.”

Besides, Awoonor himself is situated in the narrative for he “has never believed in the idea of an author as a recluse”, and therefore, his “prominent presence in the novel...suggests the intimacy between the artist and his community” (Sackey, 2000:369). *The Return*, on the other hand, is modelled on a Hollywood, highbrow, pulp fiction tradition targeted at a Western readership with copious footnotes and explanatory glosses. A major problem with the text is the pre-historic, dreadful, and barbaric picture Oddoye paints of the twenty-first century Azanta Kingdom. It is a state-within-a-state (modern Ghana) located deep within an impenetrable jungle, a totally claustrophobic and xenophobic island barricaded against and untouched by modern civilization, almost frozen in time. Oddoye's Azanta is a law unto itself with the state apparatus being fuelled and driven by institutional bloodlust. It is a typical Tarzan setting. On first encounter, any visitor from the West, even if he has African blood flowing through him, would regard the people as ‘noble savages’.

Thus, *The Return* reads more like an expatriate colonial novel set in Africa, in the manner of Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, where a 'civilized' Western figure ventures into the infernal African 'darkness' and is either crushed under the pressure of Africa's unaccommodating environment, coupled with the people's 'savagery', or survives due to some Western ingenuity. Jason is, indeed, a replica of Bellow's Henderson who, after all the trouble he goes through in the Ethiopian jungle among 'savages', eventually gets crowned king and flies back triumphantly into the glare and glitter of Western civilization.

Osiris Rising: Africa Betrayed, Dreams Deferred

Osiris Rising, parts of which echo or draw liberally on Asante's "Afrocentricity," is the synthesis of Ayi Kwei Armah's quest for African identity which he introduced in *Two Thousand Seasons* as "the way." The linkage between *Two Thousand Seasons* and *Osiris Rising* is immediately striking. Both are based on African myths; the former on the Akan myth of Anoa (Sekyi-Otu 1987; Wright 1989), the latter on the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris (Mensah 1998; Jackson 2000). *Osiris Rising* is the saga of a young African-American woman who embarks on a journey to Africa to learn first-hand the relevance of ancient Egypt to contemporary Africa and the African Diaspora. This quest is epitomized in the 'ankh' (ancient Egyptian symbol of the life force). The odyssey of the protagonist, Ast, begins when she tries to find out from her grandmother the name, import and origin of the 'ankh' symbol. This interchange opens a whole chapter on the Slave Trade which is linked up with the story of a book, *Journey to the Source*. It is a book which, apart from Ast's incisive probes into the history of the Slave Trade and the history of Africa in America, becomes the main motivating factor for Ast's desire to go to Africa, to seek hidden truths about her African origins and what she considers to be the authentic story of Africa.

Ast holds a first degree in World History; for her second degree she "shifted closer home" to Egyptology and for her doctorate she focused on Kemet (ancient Egypt). With her comprehensive grounding in Afro-centric scholarship, by graduation time, "her search for knowledge of self, within

the universe, had led her through a flow of changes... The search had accelerated her decision: return” (8). Like Lumumba, and unlike Jason, Ast imposes on herself a messianic mission to move to Africa, and once in Africa, with the help of kindred intellectuals, to transform Africa into a continent of visionary people committed to casting away their veil of inferiority. But in her own ‘journey to the source,’ Ast, in terms of her motivations, ideological impulses and desires, is like thousands of other seekers of ‘truth’ from America. However, the ‘African reality’ confronts any adventurer in search of history, knowledge, emancipation, fulfilment and release from the frustrations of America. The ‘African reality’ becomes the litmus test for all these seekers, including Ast. The ‘African reality’ is aptly described by Netta, a Ghanaian teacher in the novel:

Foreigners are more vulnerable than people born here. They can be miserable without jobs. Some are elated when offered villas and monthly allowances. A few African-American visitors, I’m afraid, got trapped that way. I know two who came burning to revolutionize the world and start the rule of justice. The security fellows watched them until they got broke. Then they hit them with money...They came wanting so much to escape slavery in America. They ended up joining the slave dealers here. (68)

It remains to be seen if Ast’s dreams will collapse against the full force of this reality. According to her, “I want to work in a society I belong to, with friends moving in directions I can live with” (69), and as far as she is concerned, “It would have to be Africa, because of who we are, who I am.” The reason is that, in America, “I feel like a passenger earnestly walking homeward at five kilometers an hour. It didn’t make sense” (70). Ast’s dream gets the initial jolt when she soon discovers that her vision of Africa is rather idealistic and out of touch with the reality, especially with regard to the African elite, the “friends moving in direction.” These friends include those like Seth who are interested in money and power and the trappings that come with both: “The magic ability to fly above famine, inflation, civil war. The charmed life while the continent burns. Money. Politics. The bureaucratic trip. Local directorship in multinational corporations [...] whatever” (77). First, there is Ras Jomo Cinque Equaino, a character cloned from his historical namesake, Joseph Cinque

(of the ‘Amistad Affair’ fame), from whose portrait we get the ‘Cinque syndrome.’ A fraudster, he typifies the diasporan characters whose return to Africa is a mere Pan-Africanist charade and populist showmanship, subordinated to private gratification. Such characters first of all need a camouflage and the first thing they do is to carve out their African identity by assembling flamboyant, pompous titles and accolades from a constellation of a supposedly Pan-African nomenclature. They must also stay close to the corridors of power and privilege as allies of the new African ruling elite who perpetuate the old master-slave relationship in Africa. In the case of Jomo Cinque, he manages to work himself into the bosom of the tyrannical President Christian Ahmed Utombo.

According to Netta, when Cinque first came to Africa, he did not seem certain what he wanted to do. He looked lost. Then the security people picked him up—he soon got a car, regular money and a retreat on the beach where he set up an orientation centre for Americans seeking African roots. His “Africult” is a mixture of Rasta, Islam and Christianity laced with Negritude (80). Paradoxically, as a young undergraduate in America, Cinque’s life was “a nomadic search for clones to white power” drawing “plenty from an enthusiast’s faith in the American myth of equality shimmying on scaffoldings of inequality” (89). At that time, he was known as Sheldon Tubman. His delusion shattered, exposing the debris of his artificial universe created from an illusion of the real America,

He disappeared. Rumor said he had entered a Trappist monastery in Canada. Some reported having seen him at a Baha’i seminar in Bhutan. He became a Muslim for a spell. Then he joined an Authentic Yoruba Village founded on the principles of Negritude and based in the Mississippi delta (95).

Then there is Prince Woosen. This fake Ethiopian character and aide-de-camp of Cinque is a big-time Mafia-type drug dealer in New York who relocates to Africa to save his skin after his cartel is busted by the police. Like Cinque, he needs a smokescreen to be able to appear Pan-Africanist and to hide his real sordid identity. Schooled in some flimsy strands of Ethiopianism and Rastafarianism, he lays false claims to Ethiopian royal blood and arrogates to himself due majesty which he flaunts by making

people believe he is an Ethiopian prince. He dresses the part in order to draw the desired attention to his person: “scarlet robe so long its hem swept the tiling every time he took a step...rasta tresses of a rusty brown like his complexion...tight wooden beret of yellow, green, red and black bands” and in his hand “a horsetail fly whisk which at frequent intervals he flicked with studied solemnity” (127). Clearly, he comes to Africa only to cool off. Asked how he finds life away from America, he says: “It’s quiet in this country...You might as well be in Eskimo country” (127).

On the extreme side of the axis, there are other kinds of characters. These are the committed type, “*a few who really dream of changing things*” but who find out “*this is no country but a mess, and it blows their mind*” (my emphasis, 134). They come to stay but they do not come with Cinque’s ‘brotherhood’ stuff. Yet they come up against formidable obstacles. Ast belongs to this category. Ast, together with Asar and other progressives at the University of Manda, initiate a revolution in Afro-centric scholarship by proposing the following:

One, making Africa the center of our studies. Two, shifting from Eurocentric orientations to universalist approaches as far as the rest of the world is concerned. Three, giving our work a serious backing in African history...placing a deliberate, planned and sustained emphasis on the study of Egyptian and Nubian history as matrices of African history... (104).

Ast is by all standards a committed person who wants to be involved in real change and stands solidly by her lover Asar even as the state apparatus plots his death. She has come to stay. Yet given the general field of connectors, some doubt her intentions and she is forced to be constantly on the defensive. Others have seen the shortcomings in her enthusiasm and idealism. Even her lover, Asar, fears that her search for roots and connection is inauthentic. Ast wants to flaunt her zeal and commitment before the Africans, but according to Asar, “Functioning roots can’t bear exposure. What they need is to go on quietly distilling lifestuff from the earth. In the dark [...] I’ve seen Americans search around hoping to dig them up for exhibition. It’s one more way to keep rehearsing our murder” (243).

One problem with Ast is that in her enthusiasm she fails to factor in the

indigenous African social and political terrain. She is in part ignorant, unaware that in Africa “educated people use their intelligence to avoid risk, to accumulate power, money, privilege” (p.71). She should have realized these barriers at the point of entry—the airport—when a security official detained her for carrying what he said was subversive material and subsequently subjected her a harrowing session of state-of-the-art electronic interrogation. Her refusal to tap into this ominous prevarication places her, right from the beginning, on a course of self-delusion.

Her other problem has to do with her association with Asar, the affable but reclusive intellectual who joins the circle of Armah’s lonesome fringe characters who include Baako in *Fragments* and Modin in *Why Are We So Blest?* These characters are idealistic, scrupulous to a fault, fail to weigh rationally the enormity of the social burdens they impose on themselves and end up being destroyed by the social order which they set out to change. Asar is antithetical to Seth. These two characters are the symbolic and allegorical figures whose diametrically opposed ideological positions, vocations, moral timbre and conduct reflect the Osiris and Isis myth on which the novel is constructed. They represent the *revolutionary* and the *reactionary* elements in Africa and may to some extent explain, as Wright (1996:263) remarks, why there is “the tendency of the characters to polarize into principles rather than intensify into individuals.”

In the context of the Osirian myth, Asar, the revolutionary intellectual, represents the enlightened Pharaoh, Osiris, whose reign transformed ancient Egypt into a paradise. Seth represents the destructive Set, brother of Osiris, who placed Osiris in a coffin alive and threw him into the Nile. The blowing up of Asar into fourteen pieces by the Deputy Director of Security, Seth, on trumped-up treason charges, an action which effectively ends Asar’s revolutionary initiatives in concert with the other progressive persons, is an ingenious simulation of the Osiris myth, specifically the discovery of Osiris’ body and its dismemberment into fourteen pieces by Set after it had been retrieved by Isis, their sister. This episode is re-enacted in Armah’s novel when the hail of bullets struck Asar, and “Ast saw Asar totter upright in a flash. . . Then he exploded silently into fourteen starry fragments, and the pieces plunged into the peaceful water” (305).

By her relationship with Asar, not only on a professional level but also in an amorous, conjugal union, Ast becomes the mythical Isis who was pregnant by Osiris at the time of his destruction. By carrying Asar's baby at the time he is destroyed, Ast, like Isis, is a symbol of regeneration. For now, Ast's dreams may be shattered, but through the child she is carrying she remains bonded to Africa and functions as a vital link between the continent and its Diaspora. Her situation more than sums up the dynamics of the reverse crossing of the Middle Passage: such an undertaking is not a one-stop enterprise.

We can only conclude that Ast may be a committed returnee bent on helping forge a new direction for Africa and its Diaspora, but due to her ignorance, idealism and naivete, she, like other diasporans, is not yet prepared for the task. Neither are Africans. This goal remains to be accomplished at some future time. This is what Set, the embodiment of destruction, seems to be saying at the end of it all when he whispers a single message to Ast: "When you're ready, come" (305).

Conclusion

In the context of "the return", all three texts operate at four main levels: (a) as *double consciousness* in a conceptual sense; (b) as *motion*—in a mimetic sense—involving the reverse crossing; (c) as *rupture*—motion hampered and disrupted by irreconcilable cultural and geo-political differences; and (d) as *myth*—lodged within a cross-genealogical historical and collective unconscious. The fourth dimension in particular—myth—

deserves some commentary. The importance of myth in African literature has been stressed by Soyinka (1976), Angmor (1999), Sutherland-Addy (1999) and other African heritage scholars. The filtering of all three texts through African myths is an aesthetic device that makes the narratives ‘authentically’ African, situated between history and fiction. It must, however, be emphasized that as a work of popular fiction Oddoye’s *The Return* does not belong with the two other texts. Its inclusion is intended only to indicate that the phenomenon is captured in both highbrow and popular Ghanaian fiction.

In effect, it is obvious in the three texts that the “back-to-Africa” consciousness is part of an emerging Pan-African nationalist culture still in a state of flux—what Patterson and Kelly (2000) refer to as “unfinished migrations.” This consciousness may not crystallize into any distinct configuration so long as the boundaries of the emerging nation(alism) accommodate everything and reject any centre, and so long as it hangs between the juncture of the symbolic and the concrete. It cannot be located on any one side of the Atlantic in spite of the present criss-crossings. Elliot Skinner (1982:17) puts all these contradictions and the lack of closure in their proper perspective in his observation that:

Relations between peoples in diasporas and their ancestral homelands are complex and full of dialectical contradictions. First, there is anger, bitterness and remorse among the exiles – and often among the people at home – over the weaknesses that permitted the dispersion to occur. Second, there is conflict when the dominant hosts attempt to justify the subordinate status of the exiles... Third, there is often an acrimonious debate among the exiles themselves, and between them and their host and ancestral communities, as to whether the exiles should return to their homelands.

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