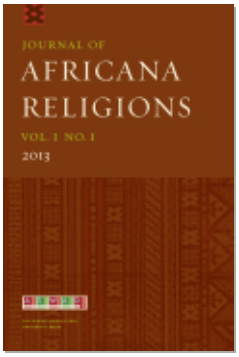
What Is Africa to Me?: Reflection, Discernment, and Anticipation

Charles H. Long



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Abstract

This essay explores the construction of Africa as a critical aspect of modernity. Tracing the consequences of Africa's modern mapping, it reveals how the emergence and rise of Europe affected the temporal and spatial orientation of Africa, Africans, and religion in modern, objective knowledge. The essay goes on to propose an agenda for the study of Africa that pays attention to both cultural unity and diversity. Such an agenda includes the study of the African diaspora and its religious dimensions. While mysterious in meaning, the term *Africana* symbolizes the ways in which this academic enterprise can challenge the elitism and exclusivity that previous claims of objective scholarship sometimes fostered.

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea;
Strong bronzed men, or regal black,
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his father's loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?
—COUNTEE CULLEN

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Introduction

In the research and writing of this article I was reminded that I had begun my graduate studies in the history of religions as a specialist in African religions. My dissertation of 1962 at the University of Chicago was titled *Myth, Culture, and History in West Africa*. Some forty years later while doing research on New Orleans, I met again some of these same West African cultures in the formation of the culture and city of New Orleans. The Dogon and Bambara, natives of West Africa, had been brought into New Orleans because of their traditional ability to grow rice and thus create a food supply for the French colony. However, for this initial issue of this important journal I have chosen not to write on a specific form of Africana religion such as Vodou, Santeria, or any of the many forms of Yoruba religion. Rather, I have chosen to raise issues and problems that arise and the connections that may obtain between the meaning of Africa, on the one hand, and the many derivations, images, and symbols of Africa that are potent and alive in the world.

The title of our journal, *Journal of Africana Religions*, evoked the mood expressed in Countee Cullen's poem. The use of the term, "Africana," instead of Africa, is a sign of an ambiguity of meaning. Employing "Africana" instead of Africa gives the sense of something a bit indefinite or vague as well as derivative, varied, and even mysterious. In other words, "Africana" covers a wide range of meanings, ideas, and symbols regarding things pertaining to Africa—a kind of potpourri, an olio or constellation of places, modes, and qualities. As Elliot Skinner, the late African American anthropologist of Africa, put it, "Africa is like a mirror, and African scholarship often reveals more about the scholar than the continent whose cultures he seeks to describe. Indeed, the very shape of Africa, is a question mark, it is sphinx-like in its challenge to all scholars to find the proper key to an understanding of its diversity and complexity."[1] The function and meaning of "Africa" in creating modern knowledge was also raised twenty years later when Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, the editors of *Africa and the Disciplines: Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*, argued that "debates regarding how Africa should be treated within the disciplines miss a profoundly significant point: that while the curriculum may be controlled by the disciplines, *the study of Africa has helped to define the very disciplines . . . the study of Africa is already lodged in the core of the modern university.*"[2]

In a similar way, the modern academy, its structures, and it disciplines have been shaped by the ways that religion has been studied, classified, and circumscribed. The term *religion*, as redefined within the conceptual schema of the Enlightenment sciences, created as many or more issues than it resolved. The formulations of religion in this mode were inadequate, especially for those cultures without written languages. They have not shown any great efficacy in making sense of those religions that possess written traditions—the so-called "Great World Religions." It would be relatively easy to make a survey and description of the various forms of religion within the landmass of Africa and those outside the continent that derive from them. While obvious, such a procedure would not do justice to the manner in which this continental landmass has appeared within the junctures of the time and space of its reality. In order to understand Africana religions, then, it is necessary to establish first a genealogy of Africa in the making of the idea of the modern world.

Africa: Continental Configurations

The landmass referred to as "Africa" is and has been a major factor and value in several different and often overlapping worlds. Here, I make use of the term *world* in the concrete and epistemological senses. "World" refers to the perspective any culture may have of the widest extension of human ordered meaning. "World," in this sense, is thus inclusive of the human mode of ordering or any human order that presupposes a nonhuman progenitor of the order. Furthermore, *world* may refer to a geographical and/or cosmological time and space. From this perspective the original "stuff" that is the basis for any and all "worlds" may be perceived to have been given prior to the human order in the same moment that such is discovered and/or fashioned by human communities. Thus *world* conveys both passive and active meanings.

The term *Africa* as the name for the landmass that is the continent of Africa, is the name given to this area by those outside of the continent. Various origins are given for this name: Greek, Latin, Phoenician et al. In any case, Africa as a continent has been a part of the global historical landscape for a very long time. As a place and meaning in various cultural temporalities, Africa has been an important ingredient in all the "ages of their several worlds." Several generation of scholars have literally found Africa a mine for hominid fossils from *Homo habilis* through *Australopithecus africanus* to *Homo sapiens sapiens*. [3]As a landmass

it is the second-largest continent, exceeded in size only by Asia. The entire landmasses of the United States, Europe, China, and India could be comfortably contained in Africa without making use of all the space. Africa loomed large in the ancient Mediterranean worlds of Egypt, Greece, and Rome and later in the histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It also mattered in Asia; in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Chinese Admiral Zheng sailed an armada of ships from China to the East Coast of Africa.[4]

It is not surprising that the name given to the continent is not derivative from any indigenous language of the peoples of Africa. Given the fact that it was known by cultures outside of the continent, knowledge of Africa was for some time based upon those areas available primarily through the waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. After the advent of Islam, more knowledge of the vast interior of Africa began to be made known to outsiders. It should be emphasized that the several cultures within this landscape did not identify themselves as Africans. Their identity was based upon local knowledge of their origins and the lands of their birth, as well as the modes and forms of exchanges they made with their neighbors. In other words, it is difficult to give specification and a generalized meaning to the peoples and cultures of this continent through recourse to the name "Africa."

The kind of sophisticated geographical historical methodology employed by Fernand Braudel comes to mind here. Braudel in his classic *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* introduces us to three strata of time. The first is the *longue durée*, "a history whose passage is almost imperceptible, that of man in relationship to his environment, a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles." The second is a social history of societies, civilizations, and states. The third is what one of his colleagues has called *l'histoire evenementielle*, "that is the history of events, surface disturbances . . . a history of brief, rapid, nervous fluctuations, by definition ultra-sensitive."[5] Braudel's methodology works well for the work he accomplished; the Mediterranean Sea is a *longue durée* and the life and times of Philip II is the structure of the history of events with the various Mediterranean states and societies forming the second structure of social histories.

There are hints here for understanding Africa though the various oceans and waters that surround Africa, but the vastness of African space overwhelms the possibility of a continuous *longue durée*. Furthermore, what of the Sahara and the great interior of Africa? Still, I think that the introduction of

the *longue durée* as a historical structure might yet be useful for coming to an alternate understanding and meaning of Africa. Perhaps this angle of vision will allow scholars to understand better the internal rhythms and meaning of time in Africa and in other cultures outside of Europe. Such matters were not considered to be important dimensions of a world history. As a matter of fact, the very notion of a "world history" was coincidental with European hegemony.

Several factors were involved in the formation of European hegemony, not the least being the navigation of the Atlantic Ocean commencing with the voyages of Christopher Columbus at the end of the fifteenth century. This event forms the origin and context that enabled Europe to take on the prestige of a special and peculiar identity. Europe became a continent![6] Now it is clear that the landmass known as Europe is part and parcel of the larger landmass of Asia; geographically, Europe is a cape of Asia.

The continental status of Europe was at the same time an announcement of its destiny. Fernand Braudel has pointed out, "To draw a boundary around anything is to define, analyze, and reconstruct it, in this case, indeed, adopt, a philosophy of history." [7] Europe's self-definition as a continent represented an explicit separation of itself from Asia as "the East" as well as a diminution of Africa as possessing any prestige as a continental landmass. The European apotheosis reminds one of Theodor Gaster's descriptions of the Rites of Filling (Plerosis) and Rites of Emptying (Kenosis) in the ancient Near East. Europe's continental status accorded vigor, vitality, and power upon its spatiality while simultaneously divesting Asia and Africa of any similar virtues. Gaster's description of what he calls a topocosm emerging from the rites of filling is analogous to various aspects of the European ideology. Gaster describes the topocosm thus:

> Basic to the entire procedure is the conception that what is in turn eclipsed and neutralized is not merely the human community of a given area and locality but the total corporate unit of all elements animate and inanimate alike, which together constitute its distinctive character and "atmosphere." To this wider entity we may assign the name topocosm, formed (on the analogy microcosm and macrocosm) from the Greek, *topos*, "place" and *cosmos*, "world order." The seasonal ceremonies are the economic regimen of this topocosm. . . . The essence of the topocosm is that it possesses a two-fold character,

> at once real and punctual, and ideal and durative, the former aspect being necessarily immerged in the latter, as a moment is immerged in time. It is bodied forth as a real and concrete organism in the present, it exists also as an ideal, timeless entity, embracing but transcending the here and now.[8]

The societal religious drama characterized in the topocosm could serve as the model for G. W. F. Hegel's historical-geographical speculation in his *Philosophy of History*, in which he creates a speculative temporality that includes all the cultures of the world ending with the modern time of European Germany, where the ideal eternity of Freedom, Rationality, and the State are integrated and transcended by the Objective Spirit within History.[9]

It should be remembered that the year 1492, the advent of the Columbian venture, was the same year in which the Jews were expelled from Spain. The Muslims in Spain had already been defeated. These events are part of the ingredients that eventuated in the ideology that would undergird the notion of Europe as the normative center of value and history.

Cultural Unity of the African Continent

The issue of the cultural unity of Africa arises out of a concern to give specificity to the cultures and people of the continent and to express the initiative, experience, integration, and creativity of its inhabitants. The dialectical relationship of the "continent of Europe" to the African continent prompted the separation of the African continent into two major zones, Mediterranean or North Africa and sub-Saharan or Black Africa. It is clear that what lies behind this separation is the old primitive/civilized binary or the later racial categorization of Black/White, European/African. The separation into major zones places the Sahara desert in an analogous position of the Ural Mountains in the creation of Europe as a continent separate from Asia. To be sure, one might cite major differences between Mediterranean Africa and Africa south of the Sahara. The Mediterranean has been a crossroads of human commerce and exchange for millennia, the waterway allowing easy access between adjacent landmasses. Such was not the case south of the Sahara. In spite of the barrier created by the Sahara, however, the "ocean of sand" was navigated quite successfully and over a very long period of time.

One of the most cogent cases against this Saharan separation was made by George Peter Murdock. Murdock states his view as follows:

> Having chosen to emphasize the ethnographic literature, the author made the further decision to embrace the entire continent in his survey. To exclude Egypt, Ethiopia, and North Africa, as has commonly been done, could only have the effect of obscuring the influences which have impinged on Negro Africa from the north and northeast and of injecting an element of unnecessary guesswork into their interpretation. To exclude Madagascar, moreover, would eliminate a prime source of information concerning the cultural impact on Africa of contacts with India and Malaysia by way of the ancient monsoon trade across the Indian Ocean."[10]

James L. Newman also ignores the Sahara as some kind of dividing line within Africa. His work is encompassed within two broader limits, the continental limit of Africa itself and his more theoretical notion of "peopling." For him, "peopling implies the existence of distinctive peoples and hence highlights the issue of identity." Since all human beings share a common African genetic heritage, scholars need both to explain how, through evolution, human beings in Africa and beyond developed similar, yet also different genetic make-ups.[11]

Newman divides Africa into six regions: Northern Africa, Ethiopia and the Horn, Western Africa, Central Africa, Eastern Africa, and Southern Africa. Nowhere in his text does he introduce the continental polemic of a European North Africa as opposed to sub-Saharan Africa. In the theoretical chapters at the beginning of his text, he lays out the possible structures of the overlapping of regions in various terms of subsistence (for example, hunting and gathering, agriculture, short- and long-distance trade, and linguistic structures). He is also careful to note the influx of non-continental Africans into the peopling of Africa as in the case of Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the fifteenth century. The continual influx of European peoples and practices radically changed the course of peopling of African cultures. This influx had a deleterious effect upon the demography through the slave trade as well as a radical change and diminution of modes of life and subsistence through the introduction of mercantile and capitalistic modes of production.

By contrast, Jacques Maquet observes the separate status of North or European Africa but gives no reason for its omission from the cultural areas of the African continent. Maquet, however, makes a strong but speculative case for the cultural unity of sub-Saharan Africa. He begins by first stressing the great diversity that is present throughout the continent. But he also insists that there is cultural unity: "From Conakry to Mogadishu, from Khartoum to Durban, one may perceive a certain felt quality." Maquet argues that while certain material cultural products such as sculpture are diverse, perhaps encompassing hundreds of different styles, "it is easy to perceive a certain relationship between African works of different origin, since one can pick them out from collection of traditional pieces from Oceania, America, and Asia."[12] Maquet does present empirical data as the basis for what may appear to be an assertive intuitive and speculative thesis. He divides the continent of Africa, excluding North Africa, into six civilizations: the civilizations of the bow, of the clearings, the granary, the spear, of cities, and of industry. Maquet is at pains to make sure that he does not account for this unity in terms of any sort of racial or biological essentialism. The unity seems to be a trait acquired through the adaptation to the ecology of the continent and through the various modes the inhabitants have created to maintain their existence.

African cultural unity has also been traced through a study of African languages, especially in oral literatures. Joseph Greenberg's classification of African languages not only purged African linguistics from its racialized overtones but established clearly the status of East and West African languages as well as documented the extent and integrity of Bantu language migrations.[13] Scholars prompted by the initiative of Jan Vansina have demonstrated the value of oral traditions as important tools for historical research in Africa.[14] The Uppsala school of ethnology has devoted several studies to oral traditions and myths in Africa.[15] Ruth Finnegan's study of oral literature moves beyond the use of oral traditions as historical tools to these traditions as literature. In her work on oral literature in Africa, she makes it clear that oral literature is directly related to performance. Thus, while possessing many of the qualities of written literature, it requires an audience in the moment of its actualization.[16] David Scheub's study of the Xhosa Ntsomi-performance is an almost perfect example of her meaning of oral literature as performance.[17]

Africa: Religion, Diasporas, and Modernity

In the previous section of this paper I have attempted to raise some of the theoretical issues involved in any important discussion when Africa is introduced to the academy. V. Y. Mudimbe raised issues of this kind and extended their range and depth in his book *The Invention of Africa*.[18] If, indeed, the study of Africa has aided in the critique and redefinition of the disciplines as the editors of the volume *Africa and the Disciplines* suggest, Mudimbe gives us an insight into what the discipline of philosophy or better, "the order of knowledge," might look like if one paid serious attention to Africa. Mudimbe, in his preparatory and diagnostic text on African philosophy, speaks of an African gnosis. He acknowledges his debt to Johannes Fabian's usage of this term in Fabian's description of a charismatic movement in Africa. Scholars of religion will recognize the term as belonging to esoteric texts and movements in early Christianity. In any case, this term seemed to Mudimbe an apt way of introducing his text:

> Gnosis means seeking to know, inquiry, methods of knowing, investigation and even acquaintance with someone. Often the word is used in a more specialized sense, that of higher and esoteric knowledge, and thus it refers to a structured, common, and conventional knowledge but one strictly under the control of specific procedures for the rise as well as its transmission. *Gnosis* is consequently, different from *dona* or opinion, and on the other hand, cannot be confused with *epistemic*, understood as both science and general intellectual considerations.[19]

I find hints in this usage of gnosis to the way I have framed the issue of religion for our time. I have in various places defined religion as *orientation.* That is, "orientation in the ultimate sense . . . how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's life."[20] This is a rather cryptic statement that bears a number of implications. First of all it implies a kind of geographical sense of things, and like all geographies it has to do with the location of various forms of materiality in space. Part of knowing who one is means coming to know where one is located. This is true for peoples as well as individuals.

Orientation required a consideration of the continents known as Europe and Africa. How are they located in global space and in relationship to each

other, and what are and have been the meanings coming from these loci? I have characterized the invention of "the continent of Europe" in ritual terms borrowed from Theodor Gaster to hint at this dimension. In like manner, the determination of any geographical space has implications for all other spaces within that field. These implications occur with greater or lesser speed and intensity in relationships to specific temporal rhythms. In other words, any valid form of orientation in the modern world must presuppose the transcultural nature of the globe since the fifteenth century. This orientation must of necessity take into account the interaction and exchanges of matter of land and lands, water and watery passages, and the bodies, commodities, as well as ideas.

Henri Baudet affirms that the basic elements of what came to be defined as Europe had a Greek, or better yet, a Mediterranean origin. It was not until the voyages of the Portuguese southward around the continent of Africa and into the Indian Ocean and the ventures of Columbus into the Atlantic that these distinctive elements became one of the ingredients in the making of Europe as a continent. These voyages and the physical geographical boundary of the Ural Mountains were not enough to demarcate the meaning of Europe as a continent. It needed a philosophical and ideological meaning to justify its continental assertiveness. Baudet tells that for most of the period prior to the ocean voyages, Europe had been an invasion route from the Mediterranean into western Asia.[21] It is from within this context that we can understand how two of European's most prominent philosophers of the modern period, Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, gave a great deal of attention to the meaning of Europe's orientation in space—Kant in his unpublished lecture notes on anthropology and geography, Hegel in his *Philosophy of History*.[22]

The continent of Africa has been an important meaning for several cultures over at least three millennia; it is, however, only in the modern period that an Africana discourse became a practical and theoretical necessity. Mudimbe, as a part of his initial discussion of an African gnosis, poses this urgent question, "Would it then be possible to renew the notion of tradition from, let us say, a radical *dispersion* of African cultures?"[23] Similar sentiment is echoed in the caution expressed by David L. Schoenbrun in an article devoted to the history of public health in East Africa. In this article he worries that the possibility for a distinctive novelty which might be forthcoming from these traditions is always in danger of becoming dominated by the discursive narrative of Protestantism or capitalism. He holds out the possibility of alternative narratives arising out of African history that would be in tension with the dominating

Western discourses and would speak more directly to the traditions and rhythms of African temporalities.[24] Schoenbrun alludes to a comment made by his historian colleague Steve Feierman, one of the contributors to the *Africa and the Disciplines* volume. Feierman's essay shows how African history contributes to the dissolution of the notion of a "world" or "universal" history so admired in the academy. In the midst of his discussion of historians and historiography in several parts of the globe, he has this to say about the American Civil Rights Movement: "The slaves and the barbarians were not coincidental to civilization, aberrant at the margins; they were constitutive of civilization, the way civilization defined itself. With the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, similar perceptions began to emerge."[25] Had Feierman been as attentive to African American history in the United States as he has been to East African history, he would have realized that African Americans have been aware of the disjunction between colonial and imperial histories and other modes and meaning of time at least since the seventeenth century.

In their important volume on the history of the geography of continents cited above, Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen devote an entire chapter to the Eurocentric/Afrocentric controversy. Some new light is shed on this debate within this context. Europe, simply as a geographical designation, is already an ambiguous, if not spurious, notion. Its legitimacy is claimed through the invention of its past, and its projection of its meaning within the world is created by navigation of the Atlantic Ocean. The ideology of Europe is not put forward as a limited cultural meaning of thought, truth, or value. Rather, European cultural meanings are assumed to be the correlates of universal values and norms. It is precisely this view of Europe that is being rejected by the Afrocentric camp. In many respects, however, the Afrocentric proponents share many of the structural characteristics of their opponents in their desire to locate and specify the origin of normative human value. For the Afrocentric position, the locus of this value is the continent of Africa. As a matter of fact, the two camps often claim the same personages as members of their respective traditions.[26]

The two points being made here, the impact of dispersed (diaspora) African cultures on the meaning of continental Africa, and the manner in which the study and meaning of their existence provide the basis for a radical critique of a Eurocentric universal world history, provide the substance for Joseph E. Harris's edited work on the African diaspora. To date it remains the most substantial volume on the topic. First published in 1982, a second edition was published in 1993. It begins with an introductory essay by Elliot P. Skinner

and ends with a concluding essay by St. Clair Drake. Intervening essays deal with the United States, Mesoamerica, Europe, South America, and topics covering religion, return of Africans to the continent, and Africans in Islam, and in Asia. The volume makes clear that any limitation of the African diaspora to the Middle Passage, as important as it is, does not exhaust the nature and meanings involved in the African diaspora.[27]

James A. Pritchard makes a similar point.[28] Pritchard, in summarizing the concern for African diaspora studies, cites the African scholar Paul Tiyambe Zeleza:[29]

> More recently, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza published the article, "African Diaspora: Towards a Global History." On the one hand, Zeleza's approach is clearly Afrocentric, framed by notions of dispersal from, and linkages to continental Africa. Yet, on the other, Zeleza, even more forcefully than Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, vigorously attacks the hegemony of prevailing Afro-Atlantic models in the study of the African diaspora. He notes, for example, that (1) not all Africans went west to the Americas. For centuries Africans were integral to both the Indian Ocean world and the Mediterranean world. There are long-standing Diasporas in both. Hence the constant focus on the Atlantic world, the Middle Passage as the model for African diasporic formation is simply not useful in the majority cases, and (2) even the Atlantic model itself is mostly a North American model, overly focused on Blacks in the US, wholly inadequate for framing much of the Caribbean and Latin American dynamics. . . . Zeleza urged increased intellectual reflection on the whole Diaspora enterprise, and especially on at least two foci: (1) the terms of analysis we adopt and (2) the problem of historical mapping.[30]

The concern for African diasporas in places outside the Western Hemisphere and in historical periods prior to the Middle Passage arises from two concerns. First, it allows us to contemplate meaning and movements internal to Africa that are not dominated by the discourses of imperialism and capitalism. Just as we seek to know more about cultural meanings within Africa prior to the modern period, the same care should be shown in a concern for African diasporas. In addition, whether one is in radical opposition to a totally Eurocentric discourse or not, the shaping and stylization within this framework often closes the door to alternative meanings and discourses.

At this juncture I should like to revisit the 1971 article that first involved me in the religious meaning of diasporic religions.[31] In this article I gave prominence to the meaning of Africa in African American religions. It should be noted that I did not equate religion with theology. As a matter of fact, one of my major aims was to make this distinction. I felt that the discourse of black theology might actually prevent serious consideration of the wider range of meaning in religion as a form of life, thought, and action. It was not my intention in this article to give a full-blown description of any African American religion. I wanted to provide the basis for these religions as the temporal/spatial template for an alternate discourse and epistemology in the modern world. From this point of view, my position seems close to that of V. Y. Mudimbe's characterization of gnosis.

The 1971 article focused on three major points: (1) Africa as historical reality and religious image; (2) the involuntary presence of the African American community in the United States; and (3) the experience and symbol of God in the experience of blacks; these points overlap. I pointed out how Africa for African Americans was obviously a reference to the continent of Africa but that it was that and more. It became an image and symbol for the possibility for another and alternative beginning and way of being in the world. Africa was indeed a continent with a very large landmass and simultaneously the basis for a powerful orienting discourse about the nature and being of peoples of African descent in the world. The involuntary stance and presence of African people in their diasporic existence in the New World is paralleled by the destruction of aboriginal peoples and acquisition of their lands. These events have prevented any ultimate trust in the rhetorics of egalitarianism and freedom that accompanied the ascendancy of Europe. The manifestation and naming of gods and divine beings as centering symbols of the orientational process express themselves in a precise manner within this situation and become the resource for the maintenance of one's humanity within the context.

Throughout this discussion I have attempted to pay attention to geographical, spatial meanings as the material basis in our discussion. This is especially true in any study of diasporas since they involve movement through space over land and seascapes. Diasporas define orientations within situations of transculturation. They emphasize the religious meaning evoked from the transhumance capability of the human mode of being. Sacrality is often understood through vertical metaphors, with the gods and divine beings above, the human below, and the earth below. Along with this vertical metaphor, diasporic orientations bring to the fore the horizontal dimension of

sacrality and the role of distance and movement in the revelation of sacrality and knowledge.

The term *transculturation*[32] was first used by the Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz to describe the existence and relationships between the indigenous African and Spanish populations in Cuba.[33] He shows how these groups adapted to each other in modes of language, music, art, and agricultural work. The contemporary usage of the term has been enhanced by Mary Louise Pratt's attention to the meaning of travel in the transcultural situation.[34] For Pratt, transculturation brings into being "contact zones" within which cultures meet, clash, and grapple. According to Pratt the zones give expression to an improvisational modality. These contact zones have taken place for a long time over almost all the geographical spaces of the earth. The adaptation and improvisations coincidental to situations of this kind have to do with the pace and rhythm of the dominating culture, the number and variety of cultures in contact, and the rhetoric of occupation.

There have been diasporas throughout human histories. The term itself received its classical definition as a description of the removal of the Hebrew from Israel to Babylon in 587 BCE. The modern period is characterized by the intensity, number, and impact of the meaning and nature of diasporic formations. As a matter of fact, one might look upon modern Europe as a diasporic culture. I have already alluded to the dispersal of the Jews from Spain in the symbolic inaugural date of the beginning of modernity in 1492. Subsequently, European cultures established several diasporic communities throughout the world. The major ones were English-settler populations in East and South Africa and in North America and military-colonial communities in India and Africa. During their rule of India, the English dispersed thousands of Indians to the Fiji Islands of the Pacific, East Africa, South Africa, and Trinidad and Tobago. While these were in fact diasporic communities, the rhetoric accompanying these movements avoided any implication or hint of diasporic meaning. Daniel Defert has noted that

> the early Europeans were pilgrims, *prudentia peregrandi*. They were taught languages as *languae peregínae*, that is, not language of a given territory but language necessary for the activity of traveling. . . . This vast universe, known only to a few people, absent from the sacred texts and of which Antiquity knew nothing could have provided a field of endless invention and exaggeration. But the writer's obligation

> to truth was the result of a hierarchical network of competition and political confrontation. No doubt the voyage of discovery should be situated historically between the medieval crusades which it miniaturises and the organization of the laboratory.[35]

Most of the diasporic communities in the modern world have come about as a result of the transcultural expanse of European culture. The kind of vulnerabilities and resources present in transcultural situations were not admitted to or expressed by the Europeans. Thus, transculturation involved for them, as Defert put it, "a collection of the world," and in the language of Gaster, the evacuation of meaning from other cultures, or emptying, for the sake of European hegemony, or filling. Africa as a continent and Europe as a geo-ideological construct have had a special relationship over the last millennia, the intensity of this relationship intensifying over the last five hundred years. On the whole, diasporic cultures and religions have never chosen the binary option for any length of time. The binary as defining completely separate worlds has been the position of the Europeans who dominated. Diasporic communities accepted and made use of whatever they found of value in European cultures but did not justify its value within the ideology of European superiority.

There was always the temptation to give up the tension created by the difference between the two modes of being in the world. From the side of African and other diaspora communities, there is always the utopian temptation to create a world of meaning only from resources that they define as original or "indigenous." Such a position would represent a kind of mimicry of the Europeans who think that their cultures have never learned from or been dependent on others. It is furthermore almost impossible to designate any "pure" beginnings in any part of the world. It is at this point that I return to V. Y. Mudimbe's notion of gnosis. He makes it clear that by gnosis he is not referring to an episteme or a science. For me this indicates a lived or performed appearance—in other words, a mode of life where practice is to the fore but the theoretical implications of this practice act as critical principles. These principles allow room for the meaning of the practice to engage in all the implications of creating a world of meaning. This would be close to what goes on in religious communities.

Let me give two examples of what I have in mind. First of all, I note that in his study of Candomblé, Roger Bastide tells us that he became a convert to Candomblé because he was able to see that the problems he confronted

as a modern scholar of sociology were analogous to the problems this community had in dealing with modernity.[36] There was one major exception: they approached the issue from *another* point of departure and were thus able to include many elements that a Western methodological position overlooked.

The other example is presented to us in Wallace Best's study of African American churches on the South Side of Chicago.[37] Best juxtaposes the performances and action of these churches with the theoretical formulations of the University of Chicago's sociological studies of African American migrations to the North and the studies' dismissal of the religious traditions of the black populations as proper resources for the critical coping with urban modernity. Best is able to show that the congregations and the ministers of these communities were very much aware of the nature and structures of modernity and that they chose a way other than that of secular liberalism or fundamentalism for dealing with the issues.

Some time ago, Paul Ricoeur pointed out that "the symbol gives rise to thought."[38] These diasporic religious communities enable us to find a new beginning for thought that has the possibility of avoiding the exclusivity and elitism that has too often accompanied the objective meaning of thought as a science of the rational. Not only these diasporic religions, but also the very conundrum of the continent of Africa as a whole, to echo Skinner at the beginning of our paper, may serve in the same manner as one of the most important ways that thought might be renewed—and the relationship of thought to action and performance.

Notes

1. Elliott P. Skinner, ed., *Peoples and Cultures of Africa* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Press for American Museum of Natural History, 1973).
2. Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds., *Africa and the Disciplines: Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xii; emphasis added.
3. For a general discussion of the archeology of hominid research within the context of the geography and peoples of Africa, see James L. Newman, *The Peopling of Africa* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).
4. It is now generally agreed that the Chinese sailed in much larger ships to several locations in Asia, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa. See the following: J. J. I. Duyvendale, *China's Discovery of Africa* (London: A. Probsthain, 1949) and Louise Levathes,

When China Ruled the Seas (New York: Oxford University Press,1994). A beautiful coffee-table summary of these voyages complete with commentary, photographs, and painting is found in Michael Yamashita's *Zheng He: Tracing the Epic Voyages of China's Greatest Explorer* (Vermicelli, Italy: White Star Publishers, n.d.).

5. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 1, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 20–21.
6. Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen's *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) makes the continental status of Europe a major item in the configuration of the modern world.
7. Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 18.
8. Theodor Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961), 23–24.
9. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. B. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).
10. George Peter Murdock, *Africa, Its People and Their Culture History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), viii.
11. See Newman, *Peopling of Africa*, 3.
12. Jacques Maquet, *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, trans. Joan R. Rayfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 3, 5.
13. Joseph Greenberg, *Studies in African Linguistic Classification* (New Haven: Compass Publishing Co., 1955).
14. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London, 1965); see also Vansina's *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966).
15. See further Hans Abrahamsson, *The Origins of Death: Studies in African Mythology* (New York: Arno Press, 1977).
16. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).
17. Harold Scheub, "The Technique of the Expandable Image in Xhosa-Ntsomi Performances," in *Researches in African Literature* 1, no. 2 (1973).
18. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
19. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*, ix.
20. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Study of Religion* (Aurora, Col.: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), v.
21. See Henri Baudet, *Paradise on Earth: Some Thoughts on European Images of Non-European Man*, trans. Elizabeth Wentholt, with an Introduction by Charles H. Long (Middletown, , Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
22. See David Harvey, "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils," *Public Culture* 12, no 2 (2000): 529–64.
23. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*, x; emphasis original.
24. See David L. Schoenbrun, "Conjuring the Modern in Africa: Durability and Rupture in Histories of Public Healing between the Great Lakes of East Africa," *American Historical Review* (December, 2006): 1403–39.

25. Steve Feierman, "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History," in *Africa and the Disciplines*, 167–212.
26. See Molefi Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1988); *Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1992); Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987); and Martin Bernal, *Black Athena, The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*, vol. 2 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991).
27. Joseph E. Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993).
28. James A. Pritchard, "Where Next in African Diaspora Studies?" in *Occasional Papers, Ruth Simmons Fellowship Awards' Symposium: Toward a Paradigm for African Diaspora Studies*, ed. Jualynne Dodson (Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich., October 30, 2010), 34.
29. See Paul Tiyambe Zeleza: "Banishing the Silence: Towards the Globalization of African History," www.codesnia.org/IMG/pdf/zeleda.pdf; "The Inventions of African Identities and Languages: The Discursive and Developmental Implications," www.lingref.com/cpp/acal/36/paper1402.pdf; "The Ties That Bind: African, African American, Africana, and Diaspora Studies," www.princeton.edu/africanamericanstudies/event/details/2011-Ties-that-bind.pdf.
30. See Pritchard, "Where Next," 34–35.
31. Charles H. Long, "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *History of Religions* 11, no. 2 (August 1971), 54–66; republished in *Significations*, as chapter 11.
32. See my "Transculturation and Religion" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Lindsay Jones (Farmington Hills, Mich.: MacMillan Reference, 2005), 9292–99.
33. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), especially chapters 2 and 7.
34. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000).
35. Daniel Defert, "The Collection of the World: Accounts of Voyages from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries," *Dialectical Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1982): 12.
36. See Roger Bastide, *The African Religions of Brazil, Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations*, trans. Helen Seeba (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), especially the introduction.
37. Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).
38. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1962), 191–218.