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A Voyage Never Ended

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Welcome to America

I am an African journalist, born in Burundi 32 years ago. I grew up there, in Bujumbura, the nation's capital, where I also went to university to learn my profession. Located in Central Africa's Great Lakes region, Burundi is a war-torn country, lost in genocidal passions in a region of genocidal passions that Americans know through the name not only of my country, but our even more murderous neighbors: Rwanda, Uganda, the Congo.

During the 1990s, as a reporter, I saw intimately the murderous consequences of my country's passions, and the cost in lost lives - hundreds of thousands of lost lives, lives of men, women, and children that included dozens of my own relatives. I am a Tutsi, and in covering my country's civil war, I saw before my own eyes the wholesale murder of Tutsi and Hutus alike, both sides hypnotized by the passions our shared - and tortured - history inspired.

In 1994, in the midst of our civil war, along with other Burundian journalists, some Tutsi, some Hutu, I created Studio Ijambo, an independent radio network that sought to present news to the region in ways that promoted peace, and an end to our nightmare. I came to work with Americans, and through them, was eventually encouraged to come to the United States for a time, to see and learn more about journalism, to deepen my understanding of my own profession and its possible role ultimately not merely in reporting the news, but in creating a viable civil society in my country.

In the late summer of 1997, I came to America for the first time, as a visiting fellow at Harvard University. There I worked at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government. It was a rich time for me, and Harvard was a rich place for learning, not merely about the press, but about many things I had not known directly as an African journalist.

At the end of my fellowship, I decided to stay on for a time in America, intrigued by this vast

country and its peoples. Awarded a traveling fellowship, I set out to explore a question that intrigued me long before I arrived in the United States, one that I saw as having enormous potential both for me and my readers and listeners back in Africa. The question was this: What do African-Americans know about Africa, and how do they feel about it? What follows are the results of my search for that answer - and its implications for Africans and African-Americans alike.

If you asked me, I would say that what you are about to read is the hardest assignment I have ever had. It created doubts and revealed truths I didn't want to know. My convictions were ultimately shaken, while many of my deepest questions remain unanswered. To be honest, I would prefer not being this African journalist witness to these findings. This is the report of my visit not just to America, but to African America.

It is rare for Africans visiting African America to examine the lives of Africans and African-Americans simultaneously: The resemblances, the differences, and the misunderstandings between two people of the same skin color, but who frankly look to each other for meaning – and connection – in a world neither of them controls.

What I've come to conclude is that they have ended up not knowing each other anymore; they ignore each other superbly, even if the politically correct among both want to impose an emotional relationship between the two. African-Americans who visit Africa, in my experience, are the most illustrious and successful of the black American bourgeoisie, and yet they do not come to learn about Africa, so much as to affirm their American identity. Yet as an African, I understand that in coming to America, I came hoping to discover a link to these people who once came from Africa.

But that search for the black American proved finally the most difficult task of my career: Those I sought out who didn't reject me, laughed at me. Those who answered my questions did

so with disdain. The most civilized would refuse politely to speak with me, or else imposed on me a diet of voice-mail.

Originally, I thought that African-Americans were knowledgeable about African issues. At the same time, I knew that Africans did not have a realistic vision of African-American life. My journalist's dream in setting out to discover black America was to inform the African public, in order to bring them closer to those who I thought of as brothers and sisters, however long lost, these relatives, these African-Americans. I thought also that my work would help me discover how African-American leaders could influence U.S. foreign policy towards Africa, as I had been taught other American people do with their own country of origin.

The idea actually came to me first some years ago when my illiterate mother one day said of a visiting black American that he was "n'umuzungu yirabura" – "a white man with a black skin." According to my mother, a black man without a Burundian name, who didn't speak any of the languages spoken in Burundi, and who, on top of it all, was born and grew up in a white country, could only be white.

My mother didn't say this to denigrate this black American; to the contrary, she was filled with admiration for this "civilized" black man. He could have had the physical appearance of a Hutu or a Tutsi, but he didn't belong anymore to her social order. In other words, there is in Africa (and this is hard to admit) a mythic adoration of everything white – even when that "white" is "black." African-Americans I later met who have suffered this same brainwashing seem to me in fact to be closer to whites than to Africans. But Africans also have been brainwashed into believing that anything white is better.

Throughout Africa, this idea has been reinforced by the deification of the "successful" American black man – notably rap stars, athletes, and Hollywood actors – among the youth of the

continent's urban slums. These young people – who nowadays use the foreign term "nigger" as a compliment, thanks to rap's influence – are the victims of an American press and entertainment industry which paints these successful blacks as demi-gods. Our children, as a result, can't help wanting to be like them. Their dream has become to "cross the Atlantic," to go to "Michael Jackson's country."

As a boy from the ghetto in Bujumbura, capital of Burundi, I didn't escape this rule of adoration for the blacks across the Atlantic. In 1975, when Muhammad Ali came to Kinshasa in neighboring Zaire to fight George Foreman, I was nine years old. Young Zairians my age appropriated the hero Ali as a descendant of slaves taken from Zaire. I, as a Burundian boy, wanted Ali to be a descendant of Burundian slaves, but my Zairian peers sneered that Burundi never sold slaves. In fact they were right: Burundian children are proudly taught in primary and secondary schools about our ancestors' bravery in fighting the slave trade.

But at nine, I hated this history; I wanted Ali to be Burundian. I felt it was unfair that Ali's ancestors were from Zaire. Later on, I regretted my thoughts. The fact that Burundians fought slavery is an honor that can be held high with pride, and in fact is part of our tiny country's great heritage.

Later, especially in college, the fact that Africans know so little about black America increased my curiosity about the relationship between Africans and African-Americans. Even the most educated in Africa have misconceptions about the black American world. They know, of course, about the history of slavery and about the struggles of black liberation in America, but their analysis of black American life is very simplistic. Here again, a combination of bad journalism and Hollywood is largely to blame. Africans only know about the successful blacks in America, not those who live in the pungent ghettos, nor about the alcoholics or drug addicts, or the ever-

grinding poverty of so many. America, or Western countries for that matter, are instead too often depicted as paradise. Faced with our own poverty, and the disintegration of several nations on our continent, many of our educated young people think that black Americans are the most privileged of all blacks in the world. Their image, in fact, of black America doesn't differ much from that of my mother and her friends, or from that of those youngsters who affectionately use the word "nigger," ignorant of its pain-ridden connotations.

Thus I was expecting to meet African-Americans who feel warmth and emotion for Africa. I thought that, just as in all other communities in America – notably the American Jews, the Cubans, and the Irish, many of whom, I was told, still live and breathe the rhythms of their country of origin – African-Americans would have the same feelings for Africa.

I expected all doors to open. Within the poor, the rich, and the average black American, I thought I would find a heart beating for Africa. An African friend of mine who lives in New York had warned me that American society – black and white – is the most hierarchical in the world. "You will only meet street evangelists," he said, when I told him my plans to travel across America. I was instead convinced I would be warmly received by all kinds of blacks, including the leaders from the black world, particularly because I had come to study at Harvard University, and Harvard was sponsoring my project. I thought that these African-American leaders would especially be open, insightful, and accessible to an African journalist. I thought it would be easy to speak to political figures such as Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, and Colin Powell, or media figures such as Oprah Winfrey and Spike Lee. I thought African-Americans would receive me like a brother and trust me.

Yet after my first two months of traveling, talking, and trying to meet a cross-section of black America, reality was so brutal that I even thought of abandoning my project. I didn't

though, because of the faith so many people had put into my work. To me, it was also a big challenge. But rejection also made me realize the following: A political and economic domination which is founded on the sacralization of physical appearance and a specific morphology, and on top of that skin color, has led to the black American society which I saw – one, in many cases, without self-esteem, and with little in terms of resources that seems powerfully able to transform its situation. Within that society, powerful African-Americans exist, I discovered, but they are the last ones to know it. It seems that there are always other people – white people – to whom they feel they must defer, however "invisible" those "white people" are, however much they are totemic rather than real figures.

Combined, these insights made me change the original plan of my report: before, I had wanted to discover how African-Americans could "connect" with Africans, and how the two could help one another. Now I saw I must do something more elemental, more journalistic: I needed to understand what was going on in black America first.

Over the next several months, I visited a lot of "bantustans," in Boston, New York, and Detroit, and in Ohio, Georgia, and Alabama. This is what I, a foreigner, learned: most African-Americans are poor, living in a rich America where their poverty reinforces their social exclusion. These African-Americans – to whom the message has been for hundreds of years that they are ugly and that they are good for nothing – have developed deep feelings of inferiority which haunt them to the point of devastating their fundamental self-confidence. Sometimes I would shout inside my head, "Why is this race – my race – the most excluded from the planet's riches?" But no answer came back.

As I traveled to different American cities, I couldn't help comparing African-American and African communities. African-Americans remind me of the Hutu people, and how they

assimilated the Belgians' colonizing literature and mentality, and believed they were inferior to the Tutsi (as the colonizers wanted them to believe). This kind of residual colonial domination still exists among millions in Africa. I have heard the same speech from Hutus and African-Americans: "They control the money, they have the arms and make the laws, and there's nothing we can do." ("They" are of course the whites for African-Americans and the Tutsis for the Hutus.) A dominated people see their enemy as one object, one unitary mass.

What is poignant is that the dominated find others they can dominate in turn. Young adolescents in a park in Boston, for example, pointed their finger at me as I walked by, shouting: "You African nappy head." Then after having run all along the basketball court, they added mockingly: "Look, his beard," as if this were further cause for derision.

These adolescents, with hair straightened chemically, saw me as a primitive, an African from the bush, while I wondered how they even knew that I was African. I thought they might have overheard my French-accented English. I felt sure that if I had spoken to them in their dialect, they wouldn't have spoken to me this way. For a while I thought it was an adolescent prank, just as we used to play on peasants who'd come to the city but didn't speak good Swahili. But more disturbing, I thought, wasn't it a sign of what this ugly image – Africa – meant to them? Wasn't it this idea that prompted them into a naïve, dominating behavior, replicating exactly similar moments that occurred throughout my travels?

A few weeks later, for example, at the Newark airport, I was searched on my way to Georgia. Two black security guards, a man and a woman, searched me. White people, I saw, had no problem passing through either before or after me. Rage overtook me. I found myself shouting angrily at them: "Terrorists are only recruited amongst blacks, right? You, colonized people without a history nor pride!"

There were other moments in my travels through black America when black people insulted me or spit in my face just because I looked at them on a train or a street. But why such a reaction? Weren't they refusing to see who they are? What was I to think of several "masters" of ghetto street corners, who approached me with a "What's up?" and when I said nothing, all agreed, "This motherfucker is from Haiti." What was it they were showing me beyond their ignorance and prejudice?

Africans who come to the U. S. fleeing the economic disintegration of their own countries remind me of the rural exodus thirty years ago that emptied African cities of whites after gaining national independence. These new migrant Africans who arrive in America, fleeing the economic collapse of their continent, are surprised by the misery of black Americans - a reality they've never thought about before, because they've always understood something different about black Americans' lives. Also, I should note that these Africans (well-educated, for the most part) frequently arrive in America only through the help of white Americans sponsors, or other Africans already here, who - consciously or unconsciously - share in a dominant majority's view of black American lives.

Thus the Africans' surprise: their perception of African-Americans overnight becomes almost a photocopy of many white Americans' attitudes (that black Americans are lazy, uneducated, alcohol- or drug-addicted, and living on welfare, for example). Meanwhile, those black Americans who, crowded in their ghettos, have never really studied Africa (apart from a popular mythology about it), in turn capture what little they know about real African life from what is shown on American TV screens: a continent of the poor, the polygamous, and the malnourished, who murder one another all the time. In truth, both images are largely the product of slavery, of colonization, and their legacy - a legacy that places Euro-American culture in control, and which dictates the terms through which these two black worlds perceive one another. Four hundred years old, these habits persist, durable, deceitful, horrible.

One moment for me describes this bitter, dialectic domination: In Newark, friends took me to a nightclub called “The Safari Club,” managed by a Kenyan couple. It was very bizarre to see Africans and African-Americans pushed into the same space who wouldn’t dance to the same music, drink the same drinks, or even make conversation.

Another item, about black leaders, not the “ordinary people” I met: When Henry Louis Gates, director of Afro-American studies at Harvard, canceled two meetings, and his colleague, Cornel West, never answered my calls, I understood I would have to accept the fact. So I decided instead to try to meet those black leaders who deal with African affairs. Nobody, however, from Jesse Jackson to Julian Bond, Randall Robinson to Andrew Young, would let me interview them, even when I was recommended by Harvard. The rare few who did meet with me only did so when white friends insisted they do.

This long and painful voyage lasted more than seven months. From my conversations with African-Americans, despite their hostile attitudes, I realized that we share the same misery and ignorance. Although born in a country where freedom of speech is a constitutional right, African-Americans share with Africans the fear of expressing themselves freely – even with someone of the same color – because I wasn’t one of <u>them</u>. Those who did talk to me always did it with reserve, not trust. One day, for example, early in my sojourn, I visited a group of older women in a Boston senior citizens center. One of them, sixty-nine-year-old Corn Moss, had the courage to speak with me and started to tell me about her life in a rough voice that betrayed poorly treated bronchitis. But when I took out my tape recorder, suddenly she insisted that she had a doctor’s appointment, and was going to be late. She added, “I don’t know, maybe you work for them,” meaning, of course, “The Whites,” “The Others.”

In the South, where there are plenty of blacks, I found the same fear of candor. People

would first approach my local guide, Cornell Patrick, when they wanted to talk to me. I would overhear them ask him, “Do you know this guy very well? Can I tell him the truth?” This fear of expressing themselves forever surprised me, especially because I think of America as the freest country on earth. I concluded that these blacks are the denial of that American ideal. When I tried, moreover, to talk with them about Africa, no one wanted to say or hear anything about it – they seemed to have no desire to know Africa or Africans. My dream of meeting African-Americans whose hearts would beat strongly for Africa disappeared after my first contacts. An old woman I met in Detroit told me of Africa: “It doesn’t mean anything to me.” A young man with her added, “I don’t know anything about Africa – and I don’t wanna know.” When I asked them what the term “African-American” meant to them, they replied that all they know is America. As Timothy Hooks, a farmer from Alabama, put it bluntly to me: “I don’t know what the hell is Africa.”

Who Leads These People?

Let me come back to the leaders. African-American leaders who I thought would be more open and sensitive to questions related to Africa are as bad as their African leader counterparts. They also lie. They shut themselves in their towers where they reign as real masters. These first-generation beneficiaries of the 1960’s civil rights movement, just like African leaders after independence, I finally came to believe were most interested in manipulating racism for their own profit.

In both America and Africa, I found that these “leaders” live no differently than the white bourgeoisie, whose auxiliaries they remain. Ezekiel Pajibo, a political analyst from Liberia now

living in Washington, told me the following: “The leadership in America which presents itself as part of the African-American community is part of the American political establishment.” My experience did not refute his claim. It seems that Africans and African-Americans alike suffer from a lack of leadership.

The Hole Between Us

The hole between Africans and African-Americans, which I didn’t expect, is not only deep but ugly. I met a lecturer in American history at MIT, a young black man who told me that the hole was so large because its roots lay in resentment toward Africans for their participation in the slave trade. According to him, Africa still needs to ask forgiveness for its willing role in the slave trade. Several other blacks from the South told me essentially the same thing. In Atlanta, the woman principal of an integrated school in Cobb County was asked by my guide to give me an interview. When he tried to cajole her to do it by telling her it was important “especially because this is a country that says we’re friends,” the woman replied simply, “But you know we’re not.” Despite her honesty, she refused to explain why, and concluded our meeting by saying only, “Both Africans and African-Americans, we need to sit down and talk.” She didn’t say when, however.

The question behind this troubling relationship – this hole – hangs there, suspended, but is simple to pose: How can these two communities ignore each other? The African journalist that I am, facing African-American leaders, sharing the same harsh history of peoples who were dominated and enslaved for centuries, and who today share impoverished lives – that journalist

wanted to grasp what divides us. Throughout my long American voyage, I met people whose faces reminded me of people from my country and of neighboring countries. Sometimes I wanted to call out their Kirundi or Swahili names, but then I would remember that I was in a black America where no one knew me, or the names I mistakenly started to call them.

Sindu, The Journalist from South Africa

Cornell Patrick, a heavy-set fifty-year-old with rasta hair who would later become my friend and guide, was sitting at a café in Clark University in Atlanta with two companions, one a woman who looked a lot like my wife. They were discussing racism, and I jumped into the conversation. From that day on, my identity changed.

When we met new people, Cornell would introduce me thus: “This gentleman is a journalist from South Africa. He is trying to about learn the relationship between African-Americans and Africans. He has been in many places and now he is visiting the South to see how we perceive Africa.” The first time Cornell described me this way, I interrupted him and whispered in his ear: “Listen, I’m not from South Africa, and…” Without waiting for the end of my sentence, he answered, "Sindu, wait, I don’t even remember the name of your country; besides, the only thing they know here is South Africa.”

A few days after first meeting, Cornell took me to Capitol Home, a large block of government housing projects in southeast Atlanta. It was precisely the kind of place I had long wanted to visit. Everything about it made it seem a typical poor neighborhood: women without husbands (or hidden husbands), drug addicts, children left on their own to play in the streets. It

was a sunny day. We approached a group of three people – a man and two women – sitting and drinking alcohol outside on a bench. We were received coldly – they didn't seem to want us to come near. Cornell then started to tell them I was a visiting journalist from South Africa.

One of the women, dressed in jean shorts, seemed to be the host of the group. She let us approach (while keeping her distance); when I gestured to sit down, she refused to let me sit near her. She didn't introduce herself, but after she saw my microphone, cunningly directed the discussion onto her topics: school problems, the lack of money, all the typical problems of the poor everywhere. When I asked her if she had a husband to help her with all these problems, she shouted with animosity: "I don't have to have a man to help me, right? But that beside the point. We're not talkin bout my man or my husband. We talkin bout children going to school. That's the only subject." Yet knowing I was a journalist, she didn't abandon our conversation; she still wanted her message to come through, to whoever might listen. At one point she even interrupted the interview and told me, "And when you record it, and let some big folk read it and hear it, may be we get a free education for our children."

While I interviewed her friend, she turned to Cornell and gently asked, "He going to write an article? Maybe I'll see it." Then she turned to me. "What journal are you going in?" she asked. As I started to answer, Cornell interrupted, "It's a South African radio station." This seemed to take her aback, and she asked, "We don't get African radio stations. Are we going to?… Do we get African radio stations?" Cornell then said I was also writing articles, and that the articles would most likely be published in The Atlanta Voice, a local black weekly.

Her friend Gina, who was more open, then told me about her drug addiction, about dropping out of school, and about leaving her three kids with her mother in New York. "When it's time for me to do better, where am I going to start? It's a conspiracy going on in the office

down there." Conspiracy: that is the word that echoes back and forth among all black people. I asked Gina what she felt about Africa: "I don't know anything about Africa, I don't feel anything." The other woman, interrupting, offered her own answer: " I don't know anything from Africa. All I know is that it's a place where they eat from the ground."

This conversation reminded me of my childhood in my Burundian birthplace, Kamenge. It is strange how poor black people throughout the world share the same devastating issues. These poor African-Americans were no different than the poor in my own country. What is strange is that they all talk about "the white conspiracy." Yet the white conspiracy appears to me as something I can only conceive of as a black ideology used by prosperous blacks to give the poor an explanation for their poverty. I never tried to refute the idea that such a conspiracy might exist, but the fundamental question that haunted me was, what are we blacks – from the intellectual to the poor peasant – doing about this "conspiracy"?

Under Atlanta's blazing sun that day, I became lost in the question. Cornell interrupted my nightmare: "Welcome to America, Sindu. This is the real deep African-American life." Quickly it became clear to me why Cornell kept introducing me as a South African journalist. To talk about my country – about Burundi – would have created a real confusion, and I might not have been able to get <u>any</u> interviews. But it pained me that Cornell introduced me as a South African even to educated black people such as city councilmen or university students. Sometimes I wondered if they couldn't hear my strong French accent. Didn't they know that South Africa is an English-speaking country? Was I just an African, without a real country of my own, without a nationality, from a continent that is just one country?

The Distrust

During my travels, I went to Queens, in New York City, many times. There I stayed with a Burundian family living in an apartment complex. The neighborhood was mainly African-American and African, with pockets of Russian immigrants and Hispanics. In such modern ethnic promiscuity, where everything forces people to interact with one another, I was surprised at how studiously Africans and African-Americans ignored each other.

At a barbecue in the courtyard of the complex, I heard from the tables where Africans were sitting, remarks such as these: “They are all full of drugs, we have to be careful with them” or “They drink too much liquor.” An African mother, seeing a young African-American couple kissing, said she didn’t want to raise her children here. She then ran to keep her child away from the African-American children. An African father was scolding his eight-year-old boy: “You want to be like them, with no discipline? I’ll beat you and if the police come, you will go live somewhere else, I don’t care.”

Yet such judgments had their own resonances. Even if I wasn’t physically close to the African-American side of the barbecue, I imagined they were saying may of the same things. “African-Americans think that we are savages, pigs,” my African friend, Albert Musafi, told me. “I find them more savage than us.”

This enormous gulf wasn’t confined to places like Queens. In the South, driving with my new friend Cornell, when I would tune the radio in the car to a country music station, he would look at me surprised and say angrily, “Stop that redneck music.” Then he would switch to a rap music station. I don’t like rap, but I would let his choice prevail. In Atlanta, I found a few nightclubs packed with both African-Americans and Africans. In nightclubs one usually doesn’t

pay attention to details. People are there to dance, drink, and flirt. People dance according to their taste in music, but I quickly found out that there was one music for Africans and one for African-Americans.

Back up north, I learned the same segregation-by-music prevailed as well. I went one night to The Safari Club in Newark, managed by a Kenyan couple. Burundian friends had warned me I'd have to observe a certain code of behavior if I didn't want to get in trouble: specifically, I was not to look directly at the African-Americans, nor talk to them. Despite these precautions, at the club my observing eyes met a young African-American's. Furious at my gaze, he pushed toward me, threatening to "kick your ass outside." A bouncer came to calm him down.

All the club's patrons were black, Americans and Africans. As I watched these two communities, I observed that the Americans for the most part drank hard liquor, while the Africans drank beer. The Africans – who that night included Congolese, Kenyan, Ugandan, Tanzanian, Rwandan, and Burundian – had a language in common: Swahili. A few could also speak French – such as the Congolese, the Burundians and the Rwandans. When a group of one nationality was talking, they all spoke in their native dialects. When someone of another nationality or tribe joined in, they would all switch to Swahili.

It was a cacophony of African languages on one side, and black English on the American side, the two sides separated from each other by this invisible linguistic wall. When the DJ played rap music, the American region emptied onto the dance floor. Yet it wasn't a dance, as I, an African, understand dance: it was sex, a Morrison-like pornography. I have to admit that I dislike the rap sex dance. My fellow Africans, I realized, were like me looking at this dance, detached and shocked at the same time. I didn't in truth know if they didn't dance to rap music because they didn't know how or whether, like me, they disapproved of it. But I watched them repeatedly

evacuate the “African zone” to go onto the dance floor when the DJ selected African music. Then the Africans would dance the Congolese dance, Ndobolo, swinging their hips too, but not exaggerating in what I thought of as a pornographic way.

Thus, throughout the evening, Africans and African-Americans replaced each other on the dance floor like cars crossing each other at a crossroad. I saw two communities of people who looked alike, yet were not the same. Instead they were blacks who claimed to love each other while hating each other, two communities who approached each other yet kept distant. As the night wore on, the Kenyan manager eventually decided to chase the African-Americans away. They were drunk by then, and fighting verbally with one another. He told his DJ not to play any more rap music. Unable to stand the “monotony” of African music, the American “brothers” and “sisters” left. I personally didn’t want them to go. I was looking for an opportunity to ask them how they perceived Africans, but never got the opportunity.

Jonette

At the Roxbury community center in Boston, I met old ladies whose faces seemed familiar, as if I were back in Burundi. Listening, though, I heard painful breathing, a cacophony of coughs, raucous voices that revealed bronchial infections that never healed, even as these women wore tight pants or shorts, their hair well done and tinted black, in order to hide any sign of white hair. Old age – a sign of wisdom and an object of pride in Africa – seemed experienced here, as all over America, as a tragedy by these grandmothers dressed like adolescents. “It’s to stay young, vital, and don’t let nothing to worry us and be an inspiration to our youth,” one of them, Jonette

Porter, told me later, explaining their behavior.

When I first entered the room where these women were sitting, they welcomed me with grimaces. I introduced myself as an African from Burundi. One of them, light-skinned, started laughing in her corner. I heard her say, “I don’t wanna hear this bullshit.” Her friends wanted to stop her talking, so they drew my attention away from her by asking me all kinds of questions. Yet I still could hear the woman: “It’s a loss of time, I can’t lose my time listening to this African. I’m leaving.” After she left, for a while the others falsely tried to be nice to me, but then one by one they too slipped away, saying, “It was nice meeting you.” I, who was looking for an interview, was left with Jonette Porter who seemed to be the chief of this harem at the dusk of life. We spoke for a while. Whether she stayed out of respect, or embarrassment, I still don’t know.

Africa, The Nation

What felt a real pity to me throughout my travels was that most black people who said that they knew Africa would then tell me that Nelson Mandela is the president of Africa, and then ask, “How is Winnie doing?” But this prisoner who became famous, and then became a president of his country, is neither my president nor my fellow citizen; he is a stranger to me.

Charles Ward, a hairdresser in Dorchester, Massachusetts, thinks like many others that Africa is a country. “It’s beautiful, a beautiful country, a country of its own. You had apartheid for a while but I hear it’s over now.” Mr. Ward asked me if Africa was bigger than America. “Would you say that Africa is almost as big as America? Pretty much so?” Harvey Begou is a

thirty-nine year old truck driver I met in Cleveland. He doesn't know anything about Africa, but told me he remembered when the continent was still Ethiopia. "Other than that, what I might have seen on Wild Discovery or something like that. I mean, I know that there was Africa, or at the time it was Ethiopia, it was the largest continent."

Why They Believe As They Do

African-Americans who react with distance towards Africans do it for different reasons: some react negatively towards Africa because of its economic failures, some because of prejudices conveyed by Western media, and some also because of feelings of their own inferiority, I think. They feel inferior to Africans because the Africans who come here belong mainly to an elite who've come here to study, or because they are educated immigrants who want to achieve their dreams. Also these Africans who come here know the African continent, and therefore know its vast dimension and complexities. African-Americans think only of Africa as the country where they come from, their origin – and they feel diminished in front of someone who knows more about where they come from than they do. The Africans coming here, and not finding American blacks to be as they are imagined in Africa, in turn becomes condescending. In my view, the problem is that, as things now are, the two have nothing to give each other.

John Cummings, a nineteen-year-old Black Muslim, for example, is fanatical about Louis Farrakhan. He admits he doesn't know anything about Africa – and has no desire to learn. "That's where we came from," he says, "that's all I really know." Then with anger he can hardly contain, he shouts: "Because Africans don't care about me. They think they better than us, they think they

purer, purer or something. You know what I'm saying? So that's how I feel about it. I mean, really, fuck Africans." To Cummings, Africans kill each other, just as African-Americans kill each other here. On top of that, Africans are arrogant, because they consider themselves superior.

Larry Wright is a young African-American in his late twenties who I met in Atlanta. "I left home early because I felt I was a burden. But I wasn't emotionally, I'm sure, but I was a burden to my mother because she had other children." Alone on the streets very early, Larry was fleeing poverty and the suffering of his mother. He ended up mixed up in drugs, alcohol, and women, and landed in jail in Atlanta, far from his native Tennessee. Slowly, he cleaned himself up and, after being homeless for a time, now lives a "normal" life. Larry tells me that African-Americans all agree that Africans are arrogant: "It's a shared feeling, believe me, and it's a common feeling. It could have driven me to violence, if I heard one more African tell me how much better he is than I am, simply because he was born where he was and I was born here. It's as if a black American is the lowest form of black in the world, even to other blacks."

In the heads of African-Americans or in their hearts, if Africa exists at all, it exists as a surreal image. African-Americans, facing a white majority, a white culture, a white economy, turn to this surreal Africa to define themselves as a people. This longing then becomes a market opportunity for African-American political leaders who use it to organize the black electorate around an ideology of "unity" with what, in reality, is today only their mythic origin. Africa – the surreal image – became then a refuge for African-Americans faced with what dominates them, a dream totally separated from extant realities.

"For African-Americans, Africa was – and is – the origin, and the unknown. For most of them, it is voluntarily unknown," Mauritanian-born Taleb Khayar Mouhamed, a professor of French literature at Tufts University, explained to me. According to him, there are African-

Americans who do not want to learn about the real Africa – and there are those who embrace Afrocentrism so excessively that they utterly lack any remotely objective vision of Africa. “We also need a critical vision of Africa,” Taleb Mouhamed argues. Those who embrace “African-ness” are usually in a pure mode of reaction. Everything that is African to them then has to be justified, explained, valorized – which is in my view an act of propaganda, not education.

Mukasa is maybe the most influential Afrocentric I met. I met him in a temple in Georgia. An ex-Black Panther, he has become an “advocate” for Africa and hopes for its ultimate unification, he says. But his role model is the sanguinary Ugandan dictator, who he presents as the ”great African.”

“In 1973, I visited Uganda when Idi Amin Dada - whom I was very impressed with – was president,” Mukasa tells me. “He, his image, gave me a more militant stand. All over the world, he was a great image. He stood up against Zionism and he stood up against colonialism, and he took foreigners out of Uganda and put Uganda in the hands of Africans.”

But Mukasa is insane: such a declaration can only be taken as a gratuitous insult to Ugandans who lost hundreds of thousands of people under Amin’s murderous regime. To Mukasa, Amin is a strong leader who stood up against the whites, and therefore is to be admired. Such Afrocentrics thereby refuse to look into the face of a real criminal, who massacred his own people. They ignore the monstrous side of Amin, and the cruelty inflicted upon the people under his domination. Mukasa, in his unrooted Afrocentrism, it seems to me is promoting a new form of colonization: blacks by blacks. This is nothing but a use of “Africa” for one’s own benefit, that leaves reality lying dead on the side of the road.

The Little We All Seem To Know

In Albany, New York, I met a young woman at the Greyhound bus station. She was a cashier at the station's café. I asked her what she knew about Africa. "To be honest, I don't know at all about Africa, and I really think it's a shame the way Africa is being – how can I put it? – just used." When I asked her why she thought Africa was exploited, she immediately resisted being drawn into answering such hard questions. "Why am I going to cry over spilled milk I know nothing about?" she said. "I can't cry over something I don't know nothing about. I was born here in America and have to make do with what I got."

This frightening lack of knowledge about Africa, and this absence of feelings toward it, is not only normal in American cities. I visited a few rural places in the South, and reactions were the same. Many asked my guide, Cornell, if he trusted me before they would talk to me; of the few who did talk, I was most taken by Carl Moore. Moore lives in Franklin, six miles west of Tuskegee, Alabama. In the countryside around Franklin, the houses are all arranged geometrically along the road, with mailboxes that stand like saluting soldiers along the roads' edges. Everything is uniform: the same architecture, the same colors, the same décor.

But Franklin is an "urbanized" countryside, quite unlike any African countryside. An African farmer doesn't have the luxury even of dreaming about having a telephone, a refrigerator, a television, a CD player, or a computer in the house. The African peasant maybe will start dreaming about such things at the end of next century.

Carl Moore is old, but looks good for his age. He was born in 1922. An African farmer at Carl's age is either dead or cannot get out of his house. He doesn't know how to drive, and in some places he may never have even seen a car. But Moore drives his Ford truck and looks after

his property, defending it from the thieves he sees everywhere. Very tall and strong, this widower owns fifteen cows who follow him across the pasture the way a dog follows his master. They look without seeing and follow him everywhere.

Moore's own eyes are without ambition, just like his cows'. Yet he doesn't stop complaining about the thieves who steal his vegetables, the fish in his pond, or his cows. He says he knows who the thieves are: they are his neighbors, black like him. As for Africa, Carl Moore knows nothing to connect him to this obscure place. I asked him how he felt as an African-American about his American heritage, and about his African heritage. He answered me dryly, " I don't know how to answer that. I know all I know is about America. I know nothing about Africa." For Moore, Africa is a place where children die of starvation, something he's seen on TV. "You don't like to see anybody in those kind of conditions," he offers me. According to Moore, Africans should unite to eradicate such conditions, starting with the politicians who steal the money. "That's what makes you think something's wrong," he explains.

If African-Americans ignore everything about Africa, Africans still don't know much about America, let alone the African-American community. Africans themselves belong to two different worlds – one traditional and set in the rural areas, the other half-modern, set in the ghettos erected at the outskirts of urban areas. Africans from rural regions hardly know the people from the neighboring tribes. Without the means of communication, without modern infrastructure, without education, these are people who are excluded from technological progress or even a modern sense of time itself. Their geography stops at the edges of their ethnic entity or tribe, and they know almost nothing of their own continent.

In the big cities, the educated and the ignorant together form a race of under-informed

people. The population in the slums, more vulnerable to the constant economic recessions that afflict African countries, has only one dream: to leave for Europe or North America. Those who are part of the local oligarchies, send their children to study abroad instead of creating the conditions at home for the decent education of all children.

In this fantastic, surreal situation, urban Africans think that all African-Americans are like Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, Stevie Wonder, Muhammad Ali, Andrew Young, Dr. King, or rap stars. Never do they think of blacks in America living marginally, on welfare, or being sent to prison by the hundreds of thousands. African-Americans who come to Africa are mainly white-collar and middle-class, who live among whites while in Africa, and thus perpetuate the image of an opulent black America.

Meanwhile, because of the economic conditions and security problems in many African countries, the continent is emptying itself of its own tiny indigenous middle-class, which is emigrating steadily towards the North. Across the continent, the African middle-class constantly runs away from wars and economic crisis. Not unlike the sixties' African exodus of peasants to the cities, when people took any city job just to be part of the new cash economy, educated Africans in these same cities today are on a new exodus, leaving their countries for the West.

When these well-educated Africans emigrate to the U.S., they often seem to be taking jobs away from African-Americans. The cultural differences, revealed suddenly, repulse both groups. Since they don't communicate, each group then isolates itself in its prejudices. Among the Africans, those who do try to communicate discover that African-Americans are culturally American – and not African at all.

When I brought up some of these issues with Sandra McGary, the director of a program for racial integration in Cobb County, Georgia, she acknowledged them immediately. She then

said, “We have to do a better job bridging the gap with each other. Not just on our part, but on your part as well. Because it’s a lack of understanding by both parties.” But what is it that we don’t understand in common? The issue of slavery is a major one to start with. The black MIT historian I met in Boston believed, as I said earlier, that the participation of Africans in the slave trade subconsciously affects many African-Americans, who refuse to recognize this fact openly. But he even went beyond that, saying that “Africa must offer apologies for its participation in the Negro trade.” He insisted, with conviction, that “such a statement would change the relationship between African-Americans and Africans.” But he then added, “African countries should also offer a right to citizenship to African-Americans,” a view I personally found unusual given the attitudes toward Africa I’d heard for months. Yet even if only a few African-Americans share his view on citizenship, many share his feelings about the issue of slavery.

African diplomats I interviewed at the United Nations think, by contrast, that apologies still need to be made to Africa, and many seem unconcerned by the living conditions of American black people. “If the African-American people won’t share their problems with us frankly, how can we engage them?” confides one African diplomat who refused to be named. The Burundian ambassador to the UN thinks that “African-Americans should stop basing their relationship with Africa on sympathies, and start basing them on common interests.” According to the ambassador from Rwanda, “We need Americans who understand <u>our</u> problems, whether they are black or white Americans.” Yet Selma Musavyi Achipala, a Namibian diplomat, thinks that Africans should be less critical at times. “We expect more from African-Americans than we offer them,” he admits.

Waiting For The Leaders

Very early in my travels across America, I discovered that it was almost impossible to speak to black leaders of any kind. As I mentioned earlier, Henry Louis Gates, the director of Afro-American studies at Harvard, cancelled two interviews. His colleague Cornel West ignored my calls. I then decided to contact four black American leaders widely known for dealing with issues involving Africa, hoping to interview them for this report: Randall Robinson of TransAfrica; Jesse Jackson, President Clinton's special envoy to Africa; former Ambassador Andrew Young; and Julian Bond, the new head of the NAACP.

Every day for two months I called their offices, but to no avail. I couldn't get past the receptionists, who would ask for my number, and then promise that an assistant would return my call. I also tried to contact Louis Farrakhan. The answer from one of his aides, when I asked for an interview, was blunt: "Don't even dream, sir." When I explained my frustrations to colleagues at the Shorenstein Center at Harvard, they advised me to get a recommendation from Prof. Marvin Kalb, the Center's director, and a well-known American TV journalist. Kalb sent letters underscoring my own journalistic credentials and the purpose of the interviews to all the leaders I wanted to meet. After receiving his letter, a few answered – though not to me, but to Kalb. They said they would meet with me. Julian Bond was one, but he then never returned my calls. Jesse Jackson did the same. This was turning into a personal drama, after all the efforts I had put into my project.

The only nationally-known black figure I was able to interview with without an introduction was William Julius Wilson, a gentle, brilliant intellectual who teaches sociology at Harvard. When we met, I asked Wilson why it seemed that African-American leaders didn't care

about Africa and Africans. His answer was, “Well, it’s not that they don’t care; it’s that they don’t care enough. They don’t care enough to make it an issue that should be out there.”

Randall Robinson was the most important person I needed to meet for my report because of his expertise and experience with African issues. I managed to get an appointment through his secretary for the last week of July in Washington, D.C. But when I traveled to Washington as planned, and arrived at his office, I was told by the receptionist that Mr. Robinson was travelling in Haiti.

Jesse Jackson remains the most popular African-American leader in Africa. After five months of requests for interviews, I found his aides’ attitudes simply strange. I was juggled between different press secretaries, and had to fax a description of my research as well as a resume. Eventually, a meeting was set up for me, following an interview he had scheduled with CNN. A Ms. Anderson told me to get back in touch with her, once I’d arrived in Washington. I in fact arrived there a week in advance, and called Ms. Anderson many times. My calls were never returned.

I later learned via television that Jackson had been hospitalized upon his return from Liberia. So I tried again to get in touch with his press office, to set up a telephone interview, but I got no answer there. I decided then – after six months of trying – that I would stop.

Maguy Womack, assistant to Ambassador Andrew Young, was the hardest person with whom to negotiate. My repeated calls to her in Atlanta were to no avail. Then after Prof. Kalb wrote to Young, she finally replied, but then dryly asked me, “When is your deadline?” When I told her late August, she replied without hesitating, “The ambassador won’t be available until after this date. He will be on a long trip until then.” When I pressed her for an interview before his departure, she answered: “Unfortunately no, sir. I gotta go.”

A few weeks later, sensing her evasiveness, I called again to see if Ambassador Young was in fact traveling. Forgetting what she'd told me, she now said the ambassador was in Washington for a few days and would be available the following week. We then agreed that I'd call her a week later; but when I did, she insisted that she was herself leaving on a trip in a few hours and couldn't arrange any interviews. I called a final time a month later, hoping to set up at least a phone interview, but she never called back. Thus I gave up trying to talk with Andrew Young.

The few other black American leaders I did finally interview I met because of the introductions I got from their white friends: Grady Hedgespeth was one of them. His assistant, a white woman, convinced him to talk to me. Hedgespeth is a senior officer at BankBoston, head of its community development unit. He was certainly one of the most influential blacks I met in Boston. Very tall and powerfully built, he used to be a football player. His beard is geometrically shaped, his hair well cut, and large glasses hide half of his face. Hedgespeth is also an escapee from the ghetto. He spent his childhood in Huntersville, Virginia. One of a group of six childhood friends, only he and two others became successful. One of the others died of AIDS, another was killed in drug-related circumstances, and a third cannot hold a job for more than six months. The fourth is a teacher. One is a doctor, and Grady Hedgespeth is vice-president of a large bank.

Hedgespeth is an intelligent leader, open, who has clearly mastered the path to power in a modern economy, and someone who still wants to create a viable economy for his people. Yet Hedgespeth seems to suffer from the lack of a supportive network, or political support, among his African-American peers.

As for Africa, while he recognizes the need for American help in the economic development of the continent, he thinks there is still a lot to do in his country. He told me that one

out of three African-American children still lives in poverty. So much has to be done here, he believes, that it impedes African-American leaders from focusing on aid for Africa. Those leaders, Hedgespeth told me, “are challenged by their constituency to say, What about us? We’ve still got so many problems. Number two, I think our African brothers and sisters, in some respects, look at us with disdain and sort of say, before you come over and try to tell us what to do, maybe you should look back in your own country because you’ve got problems there too.” As I left our meeting, I reflected that – though I liked Hedgespeth and admired his achievement – his ideas had one foot in reality and another in a purely American dream – and revealed the extent to which Africa was in fact low on his agenda.

The Rev. Charles Stith was another leader I was able to meet thanks to his white friends. Recently named U. S. ambassador to Tanzania, Rev. Stith heads a large and influential black church in Dorchester, Massachusetts, as well as a national coalition called Organization for a New Equality. Arranging to meet Rev. Stith wasn’t easy. I tried getting an appointment on my own, but his assistant said he was gone for two months. When I spoke to the white Harvard professor who had given me his number, he offered to call Stith for me. Thanks to him, I got an appointment. When I asked Rev. Stith why he agreed to see me only after the professor called, he replied that he couldn't speak to just anyone, and that this was perfectly normal.

When I then asked him why black Americans didn’t appear to be organized in order to influence U.S. foreign policy towards Africa, as other American communities – such as the Irish, the Cubans, and the Jews do – his answer was: “Irish Americans are from Ireland. They can identify the family, the place of origin of the family. In many cases they still have relatives in Ireland. But when you think of African-Americans, they’re called ‘African’ Americans, but Africa’s a continent. So you don’t have the same sort of linear relationship.”

This answer led me to a series of questions about whether he saw any emotional ties between these two peoples of color. Rev. Stith said he saw no real emotional ties, and insisted that Africa's corruption was an endemic problem and impediment to creating any such ties. "When you've got to go into a country, and you've got to pay off somebody to start a business, that's a problem. What you need is political leadership that has the courage not simply to say that we've got a zero tolerance for bribery and corruption. It needs to try to articulate an economic vision that folks understand in the long range." Could Africa, I wondered – thus always presented in a negative light – ever hope to hold any meaning for African-Americans? Do African-American people themselves in fact have such valuable leaders that Rev. Stith wants African people to replicate them?

Journalists

African-American journalists were also very difficult to meet. I didn't know they would be so closed, particularly towards a professional colleague. I repeatedly called Derrick Jackson, an African-American columnist at The Boston Globe, but I never got an answer to my messages. I also called editors at different African-American papers such as The Chicago Defender, The Amsterdam News, The New York Beacon, The Washington Afro-American Tribune, and The Atlanta Tribune – but no one from any of these papers ever returned my calls. Only the editor of The Philadelphia Tribune, Orv Randolph, let me interview him on the phone – and was frankly helpful.

By contrast, when in the South, I easily obtained a meeting with CNN's president, Esson

Jordan, who is white. For about forty-five minutes, we exchanged ideas on the situation of African-Americans. He said he wasn't an expert, and that I should contact Graylian Young, an African-American in charge of southeastern U.S. news at CNN. I spoke to Young once on the phone. I explained my purpose in calling. He said he was busy – and that was the last time I spoke to him. I left messages, but Young never returned them. I didn't call Esson Jordan back to ask him to intervene, because I was tired of being introduced by whites to people who still call themselves my brothers.

Black People, Black Leaders

African-Americans are not tender towards their leaders. I constantly heard them call their leaders nepotists, liars or sell-outs.

Many ordinary blacks seem to think that after Martin Luther King Jr. died, blacks were deprived of real leaders in America. They also say that those who present themselves as "leaders" today are not their leaders, because they were chosen and promoted by a media controlled by whites.

Ralph Duckeverson is a counselor to Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell on youth-related issues. Although his mother is Japanese and his father is African-American, Duckeverson's childhood was spent in the black neighborhoods of Washington, and he says that he feels more black than of mixed race. For him, the current black American leadership has a tendency to cut itself off from the daily reality of black life – and those who are real leaders get no national attention. He described to me, case by case, the cream of black leadership with disdain: "Jesse Jackson is all

about money. If there is no payoff for him, he's not going to do anything. I'm sorry if you're a friend of his, but I just don't see Jesse doing a lot for us. Jesse was elected by the people of D.C. to represent them on the Hill. He ran for that office and then abandoned them because there was no money."

Duckeverson considers Louis Farrakhan as someone whose effectiveness is all but totally destroyed because of his stridency. "If Farrakhan were to do something, it would be taken as a war. It would be taken all out of context. It would be taken as a racist, racially-motivated attack." As for Colin Powell, he disdainfully says, "Colin Powell smokes cigars with both sides."

A lot of the black people I met manifested a similar animosity towards their "leaders." Some prefer not to mention names, but others pointed the finger at those black leaders who are seen as closer to whites than to blacks. Abdoul Karim, a young black man I met on a Greyhound bus headed for Detroit, declared insistently that there are no black leaders today. "Right now, all these people they call sort of black leaders, they ain't nothing but a bunch of worms. That's the way I feel about it. A bunch of token people." A 24-year-old Muslim from Dorchester who grew up in Syracuse, he is so angry, he says he sees no leaders.

Harvey Begou is a truck driver. He doesn't follow what happens in politics. All he knows, he says, are the interstate highways that he's driven since finishing high school. Here is his opinion of America's black leaders: "It's hard to say. I don't follow that much, some of them are all right, I guess. Some, just like others, are corrupt."

Tina Glover is a single parent who attends a university; her dream, she told me, is to go to Africa someday. For her, America's black leaders are a "bag of shit." "Farrakhan is not always out for the black people as a group, he is for himself and his religion only," she claims. "So you have to watch out about our black leaders. Jesse Jackson is another one. He is about his family only.

The rich black people, not the poor black people. The rich black people."

Others I met don't want to criticize their leaders, particularly in front of a microphone held by an African journalist. They prefer to keep their opinions to themselves. "I will never discredit no black leader. I think all of them are doing their best. They are my brothers," Jonette Porter, the sixty-nine-year-old woman I met at the Roxbury Community Center, told me.

What We Fear

In general, black Americans' reactions to their leaders, I discovered, are similar to those of Africans who blame all their misery on their own leaders, who have no one to account to, certainly not to the people. There are also other Africans, who, fearing reprisals or wanting to protect themselves, prefer not to voice their opinions. Their reactions, I realized, are the same as the black Americans who consider their leaders salesmen of compassion for the black man, but who are really out for their own profit.

I have to admit that in Africa many leaders have similarly used ethnicity or tribe to get to power. Once in office, they then surround themselves with their own people and friends to consolidate their power. I am tempted to say – though I know this feeling is born of despair – that black people in the world suffer from the absence of leaders who take black peoples' needs to heart. Some of course still say the reasons for this rest only in the white man's supremacy, but where has black leadership taken up its responsibility toward the masses? The reality in modern Africa, all too often, has been black dictatorships no better than those of colonial Europe. The ghettos I saw in America, in that sense, it seems to me, are no different from those in Africa. They

are oceans of poverty in which – on islands of opulence – their leaders stand alone.

Whose Interests?

Why did the black American leaders I wanted to interview almost all react the same way? This question seems to me to be fundamental – and in my opinion the answer helps explain the attitude of African-American leaders towards Africa.

In a few words, I think the African appears as someone with nothing to offer, and therefore is of no interest. An African journalist cannot give anything to American black leaders. They are already famous in Africa, thanks to American and European media. Coverage in the Western media, moreover, often helps them obtain funds for their projects, while the media in Africa don't reach investors or donors, but only beggars.

But even this is too simple, because the same phenomenon exists in Africa itself. When I went to Uganda in 1994 to report on the bloody coup which ended in the murder of the Hutu president of Burundi, the Ugandan president's press secretary emphatically refused to allow me to meet him. I was even forbidden access to a joint press conference held by the presidents of Uganda and Eritrea. Yet at the same moment, the same press secretary was arranging appointments for teams of white journalists from Europe and America who wanted exclusive interviews. More recently, during the Zairian civil war, as Kabila's troops advanced against Mobutu's regime, the Congolese rebels made me wait for hours at the Rwandan border, while they freely let white journalists come in past me. Apart from black leaders' constant courtship of white power – in America as well as Africa – I think that the deeper problem is one of the

dominated becoming the dominators. The loser in all this is the American black man without a business card, or the poor African peasant woman who has nothing to offer.

Poor, And Mad About God

Kelton Patrick is nine years old and lives in Capitol Home, a group of low-income housing projects in Atlanta, its inhabitants mostly black. The day I met him, Kelton was playing with other children near a church, and when I asked him what he was doing, he said, “I go to camp here.” His parents are separated, I learned. His mother, “she at home,” the thin but energetic youngster shouted. But when I asked, “Where is your Dad?” Kelton’s answer hit me like a stone in the face. “In jail,” he related off-handedly. Kelton seemed not to be worried about anything. He runs, he plays, he jumps around like all children his age, and each night his mother tells him that Jesus loves him. “What does your mother say to you?” I asked him. “Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me,” he replied. What else can she tell him? What else can he say?

Kelton’s friend Martin Taylor is twelve years old. He only knows his mother’s name, Shauna, not his father’s. He sees his father rarely: “Well he, he lives real far. I don’t get to see him every day. I don’t see him hardly every day.” I asked him when he got to see his father. Martin looked down at the ground, and said shyly, “Well, he come over on Christmas and give us, like, toys.” Like his friend Kelton, Martin has a strong connection to God, which he inherits from his mother Shauna. “I live in Capitol Home and they tell that when you get back home, take your people there. If they love God, they should have kept going. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

On this corner of Capitol Home, the church is near, and Christians do not need to go far to

commune with God. The power of God is so strong in black communities that it is hard to escape its influence. People around here, I noticed, pray all the time, before and after meals.

Katrina Mathis, an ex-Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea, holds a firm belief in God, and says such belief is a big part of African-American culture. “I think,” she tells me gently, ”you have to operate from a spiritual base.” This young woman in her late twenties, from the black American middle class, went as a Peace Corps volunteer to live in a village outside Conakry, Guinea. The Guineans always considered her white, which made her mad. In fact, Katrina still harbors real bitterness toward Africans, saying they are corrupt and they lie.

Ralph James Dager is retired and homeless. His life consists of praying and begging at a local black Presbyterian church in the heart of Atlanta. I met him on the steps of the church. Ralph James hasn’t lost hope that Jesus will save him. “Jesus solves all my problems,” he told me. In Dorchester, near Boston, I attended a church hoping for an interview with its pastor. I never got the appointment, but got to talk to some of the churchgoers. To my question about a solution to black peoples’ struggles, their answer was unanimous: “Jesus, man, Jesus is the only way.”

Black churches, my travels taught me, are rarely empty; on Sundays it is hard to find a seat. The Rev. Howard Heywood said it the best: “Our churches are filled on Sundays, more than white churches, because our people are spiritual.” Listening to him, I found myself sardonically thinking that surely white people do more productive things on Sundays, because they do not live lives of such illusions. I think of Ray Kelley, whom I’d met earlier that day. “White people go to work on Sunday, man,” he says, though he himself holds three different jobs.

Religion’s influence is even more striking with black Muslims. Abdelsalam is an ex-Marine. He was born and raised in Alabama. He is the prototype of a Marine, but unemployed. Converted to Islam a year ago, he seems more pious than many Africans I know who were born

Muslim. Abdelsalam hates America, which he served. “They didn’t intervene in Bosnia because Muslims were being killed,” he insists to me. His speech is full of anger. Anger about injustices against blacks, about drugs rampant in the ghettos, about crime, broken families. When I ask him to propose solutions, he replies, “The Koran, man. The Koran is the key.” These Koran-mad people, who I see as both very politicized and manipulated, think that Islam gives them pride. “Because I am Muslim, my mind is already free. And I know I’m inferior to no one at all,” another Muslim, Abdul Karim from Dorchester, told me.

I was struck by the uniformity of all the answers I heard from black Muslims. In many black Muslim mosques, I saw bulletin boards with information on conferences about sanctions against Iraq or Libya – but nothing on the sanctions imposed on my country, Burundi, where they have had far more disastrous effects, in terms of victims, than in Iraq or Libya. If the sermons begin with readings from the Koran, they often end up in a critique of American foreign policy towards some Arab country, or about racism in the U.S. Yet as I well know from Africa, there isn’t just one Islam, but many different Islamic sects, with widely different views. In general, compared to African Islam, black American Islam struck me as more about lobbying for certain Arab countries or Arab ideologies than as an authentic and strong religious group.

I visited a temple known as the First Afrocentric Temple in Atlanta. I had never heard about “Afrocentrism,” at least not in Burundi, and I still don’t really understand this politico-religious movement, that seems to be a mix of animism and Christianity. Oddly, though, I must note that when I tried to introduce myself to the temple’s leader, he received me very coldly because he thought I had moments before ignored him in favor of a Congolese I had just met there. “You Africans,” he sneered, “you think you are superior – but we are all equal.” I apologized for my inadvertent slight, but in vain.

What little I finally understood about this religion came from a business card given to me by the temple's second-in-command, an American who called himself Seyoum Oba Nefta Tyehimba. "We believe there is no place without God," the card declared. From my new Congolese acquaintance, I found out that "Afrocentrism is a way of believing in God through one's ancestors," though even this proved no more enlightening to me.

Yet the power – and variety – of worship sites in the black ghettos of America has also, I learned, a darker side. Many of these places have become businesses that permit some leaders personally to make tremendous amounts of money, just as the drug dealers do with cocaine and heroin. Black American religion is mixed up thoroughly with politics, many told me, and controls the community. It is the religious leaders who exhort their flock to vote for a particular politician. "It's our church leaders now, they're telling us who to vote for," says Angel Randolph, a Peace Corps consultant living in Atlanta. "They'll just come to the pulpit and they'll say we're voting for such and such. 'These people did not want us to build our building. Don't vote for them.' We don't vote, they don't get in. Especially if you're talking about city things," adds her colleague Katrina Mathis.

If Iran has its mullahs who control the power, the ghettos of black America have their reverends who control, with Bible in hand, the masses of poor people who help these same leaders gain access to power. White politicians don't need to make promises to the black electorate; instead, they negotiate with the ministers, who do the rest. When one talks about reverends, one speak of the landlords of the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, to which a majority of black Americans adhere.

The white leaders who control power have understood this well, I constantly heard, and have abandoned the black communities to the reverends, who have become their intermediaries. It

is as if a white candidate said, “I have no desire nor the time to take care of blacks. You – the Church – take care of it.” The ministers then dictate from their pulpits, and dominate their flock without distinguishing between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. From on high they preach “the good news,” then take benefits from below.

Dr. Oscar Williams is an NAACP member who teaches community leadership development at Tuskegee University in Alabama. His resume is very full: besides being a former Peace Corps volunteer, 32nd degree Mason, and president of a credit union, he’s also an active Baptist Church elder. Despite his status in the church, he harbors bitter feelings towards black religion’s frequent role: “We live here in the Bible Belt, the very buckle of the Bible Belt,” he complained to me, but what too many black clergy preach, he says, “is just happy fatalism. Just be happy, ‘cause you can’t do nothing about what’s going to happen, no way. And so they make the people nice and kind and cozy – it’s like giving them opium, isn’t it? Like giving them some kind of sleeping drug, you lullaby them.”

Williams says later that the central problem of the African-American community is its antipathy to real change. Has the African-American community changed since the end of segregation and slavery? Or has it changed only masters, who themselves respond to other masters, the real ones?

Ray Kelley, a divorced father of two, used to go to church on Sundays even when he was on drugs. “When I was trying to come off drugs I went to Church, Church, Church. I didn’t get nothing out of it, man. And till I started to find my own way with God, I got more out of it. I’m just not no follower.” Kelley thinks African-American culture is too religious. “More probably than anybody, we think the Church is the answer and Church is great. But we get so caught up into it, we forget. We forget when we start getting near the Church, man.”

Carl Moore, the old farmer I met in Tuskegee, is very critical towards black religion, which he loathes as just another big business exploiting the poor. “The Church, oh my Church, is as bad as the politician. All they want is money, money, money. We got some of the richest churches in the world.” Moore thinks that blind faith – not just in the Christian church, but all religion in general – is the black community’s most serious mistake. People don’t realize how religious leaders, he says, use this faith to enrich themselves. “Politicians and churches, they’re tough, they’re rough. You vote a politician in office, six months from then, big business got him. And they all together.”

Orv Randolph, the editor in chief at The Philadelphia Tribune, who was one of the few black journalists who would talk with me, also wonders about the positive impact of the Church in terms of education, drugs, criminality and especially AIDS, which is decimating blacks in America as well as in Africa. “I don’t see any work done on those issues by the African-American leadership, even the churches,” he says. For Randolph, faith should bring solutions to the problems – not profit from them.

The power of the Church in the black community, of course, comes from its history. During slavery, churches were the only places where slaves could speak, many African-Americans told me. Ministers were very respected. During the 1960s Civil Rights movement, I have been told, the Church took its responsibilities seriously. The Church used its influence then to liberate blacks from racism. Following Dr. King’s example, the Church had the courage to end American apartheid; but since then, it hasn’t used its influence to improve the daily lives of black people.

But why? I asked. What I heard was that the Civil Rights movement gave the black middle class the means to integrate itself into the lifestyle of the white middle class. And as that happened, the job of preacher became a stepping stone to bigger new political jobs such as mayor,

ambassador, etc. Yet didn't we in Africa over the same period, I reflected, see the same behavior as intellectuals, supported by the churches, fought for independence – and then ended up governing, living and thinking like the very whites they replaced?

Even though I consider myself a believer in God, I kept asking myself about black religion's real and tangible benefits. Why is the black community devastated by sexually transmitted diseases and a high illegitimate birth rate? Why are drugs so common? Ralph Duckeverson, the counselor to Atlanta's mayor whom I spoke with, thinks that the black Church today is similar to a group of businessmen whose ambition is to replace the government. "A church leader contacted me to get funds for starting a youth project. If he wants to do it, fine – but not by asking us for money. This is government's work, not the Church's." Duckeverson says he doubts the Church's morals in general nowadays, and its relevance. "American is very religious and very immoral at the same time, so where is the need for the Church?"

Yet what I learned from my travels was that in black America, new churches sprout like mushrooms, often without a defined line between their mission and the mission of the government. Religious leaders dominate the political leadership available to African-Americans. Yet separated from one another by their denominational differences, they are unable to find a political platform that would unite them rather than divide them. How will the Muslim Farrakhan, the Baptist Jesse Jackson, and the conservative Colin Powell agree on a program for black people?

What Divides – And Unites – Us

In my travels, I saw important differences between African-Americans and Africans that among black Americans precluded warmth toward Africa or anything African. These differences at the same time made even clearer to me the common fact in the two peoples' lives. I can summarize this simply: black people all over the world are the poorest. The more one is black, the more one is poor. Nobody seems to want to solve this problem.

There are of course black people who are no longer poor - in both America and Africa. Unfortunately, they are not now leading the struggle to end the poverty devastating the overwhelming majority of blacks worldwide. First, those few black people who've become rich, and who've assimilated themselves to white culture, it seems to me, have abandoned poor blacks, whether in Africa or America. From colonization on the one hand, and slavery on the other, these new black elite have formed an ideology based on the domination of black people by black people.

The black ideology which once accompanied struggles for black liberation on both continents never evolved into an authentic and democratic black leadership. The old ideology used to blame whites for all the miseries of black people. It still does today. Yet if such views were important in the 1950s and 1960s, during the independence struggles in Africa and the American Civil Rights movement, it doesn't make sense thirty years after our freedom's been regained.

African leaders must assume responsibility for their failure to provide education and social and economic development. Mobutu – and now Kabila – can no longer blame the Belgian colonizers for the Congo's problems. Yet in all his speeches, Mobutu never stopped blaming the Belgians for the chaos in Congo. Abacha in Nigeria likewise never hesitated denouncing the British. No African leader ever took responsibility for bad political and economical management. The problem was always because of the others.

The same analysis seems applicable to America's black leadership today. Too much energy is wasted on accusations of racism. The failures of the black community are blamed on pressure from, and conspiracy by, whites. Of course, this country is really a racist country. And yes, it is a pity that such a rich country, with such an educated and democratic people, has not been able to break loose from habits of the past. But even if racism is a reality, the black leadership should wake up and use all its power to improve the conditions of its communities. Many leaders, though, still use white domination to explain the lack of black economic progress, even though, psychologically, the cost for this is that black people end up believing in the whites' supremacy, and give over to God – rather than themselves – the power of salvation, thereby contributing to young blacks' lack of education and maturity.

This now-outdated black ideology – reinforced by what I now see as a stagnant religious cynicism – has had similar effects on the lives of millions of black Americans and Africans alike. I would give you four main reasons, although the complete list is longer.

First, black people remain in the world the most pious. Where there is a black man, there is a church or mosque or temple. Yet as Burundi's United Nations ambassador told me, our faith never gives us real answers to the terrible life conditions of blacks: "The African prays every morning – and remains empty-handed next to the church." Even if the separation of state and church is constitutionally a reality, the ties between church and state remain strong in many African states. In my own experience, the genocide in Rwanda is an example, and the active participation of church members in the massacres in Burundi cannot be denied.

A second reason: Black people are the most immobile on the planet. Nobody wants black people in Europe or America – and even less in their native Africa. The truth is that Africans don't travel within their continent. Their elite meets in the U.S. and in Europe, but only seldom in

Africa. I met Africans of many different nationalities together in the U.S., but never in Burundi, or anywhere else in Africa. I myself was put in jail in Kenya in November 1996 while traveling to Nairobi as a working reporter, because my country had been struck by sanctions by surrounding countries, including Kenya. At Harare airport in Zimbabwe in June 1996, I was accused of being "a criminal" simply because I was Burundian in the midst of my country's civil war. I clearly wasn't poor enough to be a refugee, so surely I was something worse – and Zimbabwe didn't want me, even as a visitor.

These travel restrictions are mainly economic, of course, not simply the result of restrictive immigration laws against blacks as a race, and explain why immigration laws are harsh in Africa as well as America and Europe. Africans, confronted with disastrous economies and civil conflict across their continent, try to emigrate to rich countries – who do not want their labor. Unstable African governments meanwhile want to control their borders because they have too many mouths to feed they already don't feed; they don't want or need any more. As a result, immigration laws everywhere became draconian.

African-Americans – even though they're Americans and not African – do not escape these sad, but real, restrictions. Too many are poor (even though they are citizens of the world's richest nation), and many of them have criminal records which prevent them from leaving the country. My friend in Atlanta, Cornell Patrick, told me: "I would really like to go to Africa one day, but my arrest record doesn't allow me to leave – and many African-Americans are in the same situation." Among those few who can afford to travel, the choice is rarely to visit Africa, although since the end of apartheid, it has become exotically attractive for affluent African-Americans to go to South Africa.

A third reason: When I look around the world, it seems to me that black people are the

last to master the rules of international trade. Instead, too often it seems that they walk over each other's feet, rushing into "politics" because that is the quickest way to riches: money laundering, special interests, illegal use of public funds, corruption. All this provokes constant confrontations among the elite of many African countries. Even those who studied business in the best universities go into politics instead, ignoring the creation of viable business enterprises in favor of easy political gain.

In Africa, the result is a downward spiral: everybody ends up behaving the same way. Theft is institutionalized, and corruption has become accepted behavior in our societies. Africans leave the real trade and business issues to foreigners, usually whites, sometimes Asians, but rarely other Africans. Something similar seems true for the United States. The African-Americans I spoke to unanimously told me that they were heavily under-represented in the American business world. In the ghettos, businesses are owned by whites, or Asians or Hispanics.

A professor in Alabama told me, "I think there's a lack of experience within the community about how to be a successful black entrepreneur. That's hard for me to say, but I think it is absolutely true. In areas where blacks have broad-based experience, they excel well. In the area of sports, we excel well. And in some areas of music, we excel well." Oh my God, I thought as I listened, the same stereotypes! If it doesn't take muscles or rhythmic spirituality, the black can't succeed.

The professor continued, "We have blacks now teaching at the Harvard Business School. We have blacks teaching in business schools right here. Most of them - I dare say 85% or 95% - have never themselves been in business themselves though, run any large- or small-scale business. And that makes a difference when you get out there where the rubber meets the road. And I think that's where the problem is. We're good at explaining it from an academic standpoint, but doing it

gets to be, you know, hard." During my travels, I observed that, for the most part, honest black men content themselves with a salary, the ambitious ones get into politics or create non-profit organizations (particularly the reverends), and the city rats sell drugs on street corners. Yet this gets us back to the notion of "quick money," and how it maintains the entire race in a dependent situation.

The fourth reason: The absence of the father in black families in another phenomenon all blacks share. As I was told repeatedly, the African-American family has suffered a strong erosion in the past thirty years. One explanation often given is the high number of incarcerated young black men. "It is a community where the unity of the family has been eroded, where men are in jail," confided the Mauritanian-born Tufts professor Tayeb Khayar Mouhamed. There is also a high level of divorce, and an enormous number of teenage mothers, and boys who refuse their responsibility as fathers.

A lot of African-Americans also told me that the situation was due in part to restrictive welfare laws: men desert their families, so the women and children may be eligible for welfare. But many do it, I think, to beat a system that beats them back. The women I interviewed almost always became nervous when I started asking questions about their husbands. They thought – I realized quickly – that I was a government agent or investigator perhaps, looking for cheaters.

But here I must be honest: this erosion of the nuclear family is unfortunately the same in Africa, despite significant differences. Although it is true in a sense that children in Africa belong to the community, the absence of fathers is in many places as flagrant as it is in America. Males are, in many countries, serving on battlefields, or at faraway jobs because there is no work locally, or they've abandoned their children to the women in favor of drinking.

I speak here from personal experience. I grew up in poor neighborhoods in my country's

capital. I saw my father rarely. He would come by maybe three times a week, usually when I was in bed. He had many women. The rare times I saw him, he was often abusing my mother, who all the while worked hard to get my two sisters, my brother, and me educated. My mother, who never went to school, would always make a point of checking our grades. When we were small, she made us believe that she had gone to school, but later on when we started learning French, we realized she was illiterate. My brother and I found out she had a friend read our report cards, then tell her our grades.

A Conclusion – A Beginning

In writing these painful words, in sharing with you the lessons of an African's travels in African America, I have tried as much as possible to put my emotions aside, but I realize now that there is no way to report my sojourn "objectively." I know I've experienced these events I've recounted here as a personal drama, but in truth, I was insulted, rejected, and humiliated as I had never been in my career. I also found I was often terrified in the country of African America, more than I had been as a reporter in the most dangerous regions of the African continent (Rwanda, Burundi, the Congo, Uganda) with which I am more familiar.

I still do not fully understand why European or American journalists, whatever their race, are often helped, assisted, and guided by two or three local journalists when they come to Africa. These locals protect the foreigners from manipulation and dangers. Yet in America I was alone, in circles I didn't know. Even the African-American journalists I asked to brief me mostly pretended to be too busy. It seems to me this is the way in the United States: everybody, black or white,

pretends being too busy even when they're not.

I know – and do not pretend – that my work and travels over seven months can fully define the contours of the relationship between Africans and African-Americans, but I can say I never saw any strong and real ties between the two people. The ties which do exist struck me as fictive, and more beneficial to black leaders than to the people they represent. They represent a story of connection, but they have no emotion, no realism behind that story.

What I also gradually concluded was that the African-American's perception of Africa is the same as the white American's: Africa is seen only globally, a distant continent, misunderstood, of no real importance. Very few Americans I met understand its geographical diversity, its ethnic or tribal complexities, its own multiculturalism. Europe, Asia, and some countries in Latin America, I found, are understood in their own particular geographies and diversities. But Africa is a block, one "country" where the people of "the black race" live, an obscure country as dark as the skin of those who inhabit it. Some even think Africa has only one language.

Sometimes Africa is reduced to South Africa. If this perception persists, South Africa will usurp the name of Africa just as the United States did with America. This perception of Africa as a unitary conception may flatter traditional pan-Africanists (and the most recent Afrocentrists), but it also should be construed as a racist bias by those who end up denying a sense of identity and nationhood to individual African states and peoples. This idiotic perception is surprising among whites living in an intellectually dynamic world, but it is shameful coming from African-Americans who claim the African continent by calling themselves "African-Americans."

And yet this ignorance is only one dimension of the gap I discovered. What I more bitterly took from my American voyage was the realization that the relationship between Africans and African-Americans is tainted with conflict. On the American side, the long-ago participation of

African chiefs in the slave trade is one of the most emotionally-charged issues. African-Americans repeatedly told me that Africa should ask forgiveness for its role. When I told them that both Rwanda and Burundi, my country, successfully fought against slavery, it clearly pleased them to learn this – something none of them knew. What several told me was that too many African-Americans think that behind every African face is a slave trader.

In my opinion, if it would actually help build bridges between the two people, why shouldn't all the African countries concerned offer some sort of official apology for this horrible history, so we can move on? But ignorance being the common factor between Africans and African-Americans, ignorance sustains the void in our History. The prejudices and poverty that have piled up on both sides have reduced Africans and African-Americans to a kind of mutual uselessness. Ultimately, this was why African-American leaders didn't meet with me – I, an African, had nothing to offer them.

And last, religious devotion leads us to a life of illusions and maintains us in a situation where we are victims of manipulations. The absence of decent education leads to a fundamental misreading of religious texts by black religious leaders who are simultaneously political leaders. They instill a kind of blind obedience and subordination in their followers that allows no questioning, no argument, no independence of mind, and that seems to me summarized in the phrase, "Happy the people who pray and dance."

Confronted with my grim image of the relationship between Africans and African-Americans, the question is this: Is there any reason for a relationship between the two at all? My answer, without any doubt, is yes. The best-trained African-Americans can bring their expertise to African countries in terms of education, technology, and even investment. Africans can contribute culturally. For example, the African sense of family in its positive dimension can help African-

Americans rebuild their eroding families. This would constitute concrete contributions, if done with respect to differences between us.

One of the arguments advanced to explain the lack of cooperation between black Americans and Africans is that the two people are now profoundly different (whatever their common origins). Many African-Americans make this argument, emphasizing they are Americans now and consequently no longer concerned with the fate of the African continent. Many Africans, in turn, consider black Americans the most advanced and civilized among the world's blacks, and assume they have no need for any sort of African help or support.

My position is that both arguments are profoundly wrong. I base my view in the very support the white West once gave Boer South Africans - and the then-shifting support it gave to a peaceful and negotiated creation of a post-apartheid regime. I believe that this shift was rooted in an evolution of what it means to show racial solidarity, not merely economic self-interest or some transracial sense of justice in the West.

After all, any explanation of the West's behavior - which has certainly helped free South Africa from apartheid, but nonetheless has left the country's economy controlled by a white minority - must have some sort of racial component to it. Other, more mechanical "explanations" don't suffice: South Africa wasn't (and isn't) the richest African country in terms of resources; its internal conflicts meant it wasn't the most stable (compared, say, to the Ivory Coast, Kenya, or even Mobutu's Zaire); nor was it even the most anti-Communist (Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Kenya were all more so).

To me, this indicates a deeper Western sense of racial solidarity than any of these more conventional explanations - even though they are by far the more familiar ones to Westerners. I say this not to attack this solidarity per se, but rather to underline its role - both in South Africa's original racism, and in the West's gradual change away from support for the apartheid regime.

In fact, looked at in another way, this sense of racial solidarity can offer hope in face of the dilemma and distance between Africans and African-Americans. I actually believe that in encouraging greater mutual knowledge and exchange between Africans and African-Americans we can give rise to a more positive future.

But that sort of thinking - and that kind of knowledge and exchange - cannot occur without a new kind of black leadership, both in Africa and the United States. That leadership must lead based on a commitment to education and economic development that benefits all blacks. In the United States, such a leadership could then in turn positively reorient American foreign policy in Africa toward the people's needs there (not just those of Western corporations and the current corrupt African oligarchy) - just as a new leadership in Africa could demonstrate its moral commitment to African-Americans, as an alternative to current leaders such as Farrakhan and Jackson who mythologize Africa only for their own agenda and profit.

Such a leadership, though, requires the firmest and clearest actions of black people themselves, and their - our - commitment to support and sustain a new generation and vision of leadership itself. In the post-Cold War world, when rigid ideologies and power blocs are being replaced by a new search for meaning and identity, the power of culture, language, even religion represent a quest for a different world. Together, not alone, we must now create our future in that world.