

A Drummer's Testament

Introduction part 3

Relative Systems

Let us stand back for another moment, to take stock of the issue of where we stand in relation to the world we are going to enter. Let us start in the great city of Accra, where Tamale would seem to be a town of distinctive cultural integrity and homogeneity. In fifty years, Accra has grown from a collection of small Ga communities to a burgeoning metropolis through a monumental movement of people. During that time, the actual population of Accra has been anyone's best guess, with calculations certified on dartboards in census-takers' offices. In fairness to statisticians, the government acknowledges the cultural difficulties they face: on a main road I once saw a billboard that asked, "Do you know your age? Work it out for the next census." Broad figures, nevertheless, indicate that within fifty years the size of Accra changed from less than forty thousand inhabitants to become nearly a million during the time I was there, and then it nearly doubled again in the next thirty years into the twenty-first century. As might be imagined, such growth has been accompanied by more than the usual complement of what social scientists call disorganization, which means that they have not been able to call the whole thing a system as such, and nobody knows much about how things get done or how all these people manage to live, to say nothing of how they manage to live together. Students of society who venture into this realm talk about subcultures, situational fields, role negotiation and selective adaptation, concepts that do quite a decent job of describing social processes in the urban scene, though unfortunately, as an educated Ghanaian friend remarked, many of the essays in which these concepts are presented could be compressed and packaged and sold to zoos as sleeping tablets for elephants. Politicians and administrators who are concerned about the development of the city talk less about rehabilitation and renovation and more about making progress on the urban infrastructure, which is manifested by a lot of holes and ditches and a lot of piles of bricks and sand incident to the incremental construction of buildings and the network of roads, of utilities like electricity, communications, water and sewerage conduits, and of service institutions in the medical and educational areas.

It is worth remembering that not too long ago many parts of even a secular paradise like America were without electricity and running water, but nonetheless, the physical creation of the urban landscape of modern Accra has been more rapid by far than the comparable development of cities in the West. This development

has fostered, in addition to mainstream industrial, administrative and distributive occupations, an amazing collection of makeshift occupations to manage the discontinuity of growth. Many people make a marginal living providing services and short-term maintenance to help the modern system function through temporary shortages of supplies and resources. The blacksmith in Tamale who fashioned a motorcycle footrest out of scrap metal would have been a good candidate for a minor character in a Charles Dickens novel, and Dickens would probably have felt at home moving among those who are creating their own opportunities by filling the gaps in a system that is emerging and not yet in place, an amalgam of new ways on conditional trial and whatever works from the old ways. The historical chronicle of exploitation aside, everybody knows that the world's cards are still stacked against Africa. Among the educated elite of the country, a few enlightened ones understand the importance of maintaining the continuity of social values by bringing traditional ways into new syntheses with modern needs. Most, however, just pay lip-service to that notion, tend to see progress as solely a forward movement and would prefer to be rid of the obstacles and superstitions that traditional conservatism throws up against their vision of social change. Cultural mores are irrelevant within the rationalized functioning of multinational financial and corporate institutions.

Coming into Accra from the east via the seaside road, you pass the old Ga area of Osu and come onto High Street, where the stately colonial architecture of the parliament and supreme court buildings faces south onto a broad expanse of seafront lots and fields, occupied by the temporary sheds of traders selling handicrafts and tourist items. One morning in 1970, so many years ago, that was the route I first took into Accra from the University of Ghana as a greenhorn hitchhiker seated on the back of a Honda motorcycle, which turned right and deposited me at a small circle ringed by the main branch of Standard Bank of West Africa (Ghana), the main branch of a department store called G.N.T.C., for Ghana National Trading Corporation, and the downtown post office. It was to be one of the wilder days of my life, launching me into several friendships that would nourish my later work on the first generation of youth to come of age after the end of the colonial era. At the start of that first day, though, my eyes and ears were merely open. Wondering where the sidewalk cafes were, I walked fifty yards north to the Makola traffic circle which took its name from the great market that existed there at that time. It was hot in the sun, but I was stopped cold. I saw a sea of people, a swirling tide of humanity that invited comparison to Madison Avenue at five o'clock on a weekday afternoon, or to the streets of the capital city of the new World Cup champion. Tamale, had I been there first, would in retrospect have seemed a sleepy little place indeed. The kaleidoscope of colors in

motion sent me reeling against a wall to catch my breath. An expatriate classics professor at the university had remarked to me, “Accra is like Los Angeles except without the charm,” and many foreigners find it a frightful and uncomfortable city. But I liked it from the first. It was noisy with horns, with the shouting of vendors, with sporadic private laughter and exclamations issuing from the hectic, jostling crowd, a mass photo captioned “Do your own thing: everyone for himself and God for us all.”

The people I met in Accra turned out to be sure of themselves and positive about the future, confident in their resourcefulness and willing to adapt to the new. For the most part, they chose not to be defeated by the extent to which their destinies were decided by other people, and they concentrated on doing what they could with what was in front of them. At least that is what they said, and when I was fresh to the city and trying to be sensitive in my interaction with its inhabitants, the advice I most often received was, “Do what you want and don’t worry about it.” The young people I knew called themselves “believers,” and a popular motto painted on some vehicles asserted on the front that “Observers are Worried,” while the back replied “Believers are Enjoying.” During the late 1970s, when Alhaji Ibrahim the Drummer was talking to me in Tamale, Ghana’s economy was deteriorating under the mismanagement and corruption of the Acheampong regime, and the local currency was so overvalued that black market prices of foreign exchange reached twenty-five times the official rate. Watching young people dance at a nightclub, a cynical friend described them as having “desperate fun.” Still, at that time, one of the most popular songs in Ghana was Bob Marley’s “Three Little Birds”; dancers and audience would sing along with the band, “Don’t worry about a thing, ‘cause every little thing’s gonna be all right.”¹ Among these young captives in Babylon, I know many who a few years later would have gladly stepped forward and considered their lives well-spent to take Bob Marley’s place in Death’s hands. Although at the time, none of them wore dreadlocks, they understood well the message of positive vibrations, and they believed in what Bob Marley called the natural mystic blowing through the air.² And as for Babylon, they knew it, too. During the 1970s Ghana was a world leader in changes of government, with the powerful fighting for pieces of a gradually smaller pie, but one could be there among the believers and not see the political turbulence. For the people on the street, it was just a matter of less and less, and what could they do except keep on trying their best to make it through? To a believer, life may be hard, but it’s still swell.

Accra is the kind of town where a stranger should not be too serious, where one can mix fun and philosophy in the same table conversation without much of a transition. Accra is very cosmopolitan, a polyglot place where one can hear all of

the dozens of languages spoken in Ghana. Accra is a pluralistic city that includes not only a visible international community of expatriates, not only the full complement of Ghanaians who by personality and profession could fit into any modern society, not only the many people who are urban immigrants or who move back and forth between the capital and the rural towns and villages, and not only many people from traditional areas who are temporary residents, but also a very great many people who cannot or will not fit into traditional lifestyles and have jumped into a life of marginality and luck. Despite this mix, behavior in public places is civil and sociable, a testimony to the legacy of cultural values that people have acquired and brought from their private lives, from their extended families, from their traditional training, from their villages and towns. Gentle, respectful, tolerant, composed, generous, hospitable, idealistic: they frustrate their leaders and managers. There are those who would prefer, for the sake of national betterment, to see more barracudas in the social seas, but it does not require a long time among the Ghanaian people to know that barracudas are just not their style. The predators among them do not break the surface of the waters. Vehicles bearing the motto “They act as lovers” assume that the populace is not naive and that the proverb need not be completed.

On the other hand, someone who has no work does not get a salary, and the proverbs of the modern era, expressed in song and saying, are “Hustling is not stealing,” and “Exchange is not robbery.”³ Ghana has known poverty. Most estimates of late-twentieth century *per capita* income range from \$200 to \$500, unevenly distributed at that. In a society where everyone is trying to stay afloat, everyone is hustling because the poverty is such that even helping and sharing are not enough. Economists have yet to write the book that explains how factory and office workers manage to live and support families on meager wages in a place where annual inflation in the 1970s several times topped 100 percent. As for the large percentage of the urban population that is unemployed or underemployed, such people’s survival is a mystery. Somehow, most manage to get their daily food. Those who have today fill the glasses of those who have not, willing to spend their last penny because they are sure that tomorrow, if they have nothing, someone will also help them. In Accra, one can sit down among total strangers and join the conversation. There is time for rest before the next day’s struggle. The burning question, compounded by every statistic compiled by worried observers of the Third World, is “Why are these people so nice?” But then again, statistics can only measure some things, and the accounting that gauges the standard of living cannot calibrate the quality of life.

When I was cutting my teeth in Accra, learning how to live with my new friends there and thinking about the differences and similarities among us, I

occasionally caught sight of certain individuals who were walking through the urban environment without seeming to be participants: they lacked the edge of those who are looking to connect with it, with transportation, with customers, with goods, or with associates. My attention was particularly attracted by several unassuming yet spry old people who were barely noticeable because of their composure but who responded to my stares with an acknowledgment and a greeting before they passed by. They conveyed to me a sense of their difference from the hectic scene. These people, I felt, have nothing to do with the modern society, yet they projected a sense of security, as if they were somehow more important to what happens around them than was apparent to me. I wanted to talk to them, but I was not sure how to approach them or what to say to them. I fantasized a bit. My thoughts led me to wonder, "Is this man the chief of a town? the priest of a shrine?" In villages I had visited with friends, I had found traditional settings quite convivial if somewhat frustrating. As a guest and a foreigner, I was buffeted with food and drink, introduced to and greeted by one and all, yet my involvement was limited by a feeling of shallowness. My friends were young like me, and though the people around me were knowledgeable enough about their customs, I would later come to need one of those old men of my imagination, someone who knew the wisdom behind every little thing, a guide who was a master of the social territory and undertook responsibility for it. The positive people I knew in Accra were often too accepting of their world, perhaps too practical about its demands on them, to have a broad perspective that looked backward and forward with the integrity of an old person's experience.

My thoughts on these old people naturally came to be influenced by the qualities that singled them out, the sense of inwardness, self-containment, deliberateness, significance and self-sufficiency that was so incongruous in the ambience of Accra, where connectedness is the do-or-die task of every moment. As they moved through the crowds, they did not bump elbows with others, nor was their progress impeded, as if each had an invisible external aura to clear the way. In their bearing was a semblance of the pace of village life as I had observed it, to whatever small extent at that time. Conventional opinion asserts that such people are anachronisms, that the traditional ways of the village are out of place and must be replaced in the modern urban world, but I felt otherwise, and I was not alone in my perception. Their subtle effect on others was evidenced without fanfare but acknowledged nonetheless in the respect that gave them room on the street, representing a common awareness of the distance between them and what they implied in that type of public place. They did not need Accra; it needed them. On several occasions when I stopped one of them out of impulse, an uncanny thing happened to me. The conversation more or less reflected the circumstances:

I would excuse myself and extend my hand with a good morning good afternoon or good evening and say I saw you passing and wanted to greet you because I thought you resembled somebody I thought I knew from someplace and so I am greeting you, and he would shake my hand and reply that he was not the one but it was all right thank-you don't worry no problem bye-bye see you. The uncanny part of such touching encounters was my feeling of stepping into his surrounding aura that warped space and time, an aura which I perceived as a startling clarity of focus between us as he looked at me and I at him, blurred at its boundaries and obscuring the movement occurring around us.⁴ When we would part, I had to reorient myself to the urban landscape, to note my bearings on the street and be aware of my position.

In the same way in which an image of those old men became a vehicle for me to distinguish the existence of other worlds and other realities within my initial perceptions of Accra, perhaps for many people in Accra, the difference between traditional culture and the modern urban environment is not an obstacle to progress or a problem for educators but is rather something that is self-consciously maintained in the hearts and minds of Third World urbanites as a refuge, a symbol, a support, a distinction to be sustained, perhaps only in a poet's vision, as a creed outworn to be balanced against a world that is too much with them.⁵ Recently, forlorn observers of that world have expanded the notion of the Third World with the notion of a Fourth World.⁶ The notion has generally been applied to the disenfranchised poor who are excluded from the significant dimensions of economic and political development, with the implied question of how are they to be included in those progressive processes. From another point of view, generally discussed as the problem of regionalism, the notion of a Fourth World suggests as well that many traditional societies in the Third World continue to function as self-contained and parallel social systems that are not integrated into the modern nation-states, with the implied question of whether and how much the people in those societies want to be. As for the believers in Accra, their distance from the observers is the same as their distance from the centers of power and wealth. In the traditional societies, the distance is greater still. The new nation of Ghana and its capital Accra represent ideas against which they assert their integrity. In Pidgin, the traditionalists refer to the youth as "pro-pro Ghana," proper or real or born-in Ghana, a light-hearted attribution to an occasionally endearing quality in children, synonymous with a lack of sense, a lack of respect for traditional ways, a lack of awareness of what is important. The Accra life of the pro-pro Ghana babies is a feast of fools, but youthful folly is not totally blind, and Accra, the believers joked, is really "I-cry." As a symbol of the new culture and the promise of wealth, Accra has little to offer that can compete with the richness of Ghana's

traditional cultural and community life. To many people in the Fourth World, the progress of the nation-state is often of interest only because it is often in conflict with the way they want to live.

Quite a few different perspectives have been used to look at and write about modern Africa, but one thing they tend to have in common is a topic sentence that generally appears early and refers to a point so obvious and fundamental and so often repeated that its mention usually seems somewhat glib: African traditional societies have been thrown together into Third World nations that are the inheritors of illogical or gerrymandered boundaries established through European conquest. Dagbon itself was not a part of the original Gold Coast Colony that became Ghana. Only in the very late nineteenth century was it occupied by both British and German forces, who split it apart, with the western part becoming a British protectorate at the beginning of the twentieth century, part of the Northern Territories, which was the area under British control north of the Ashanti protectorate. During World War I, German Togoland was divided between the British and French, and the eastern part of Dagbon became part of the protectorate of British Togoland in 1922. In 1956, with Ghana about to become independent the next year, a referendum aligned British Togoland with Ghana instead of with the French colony. Dagbon at least was unified within a national entity, although within the nation, it was far removed from the political and economic powers of those societies to its south.

This type of situation, the political legacy of colonial geography, is commonly one among many problems that face the new Third World states, and it is to be expected that leaders of these nations should spend time and energy exhorting the necessity of national unity to a general populace often composed of traditional rivals or even enemies. The message of unity is a necessary component of the function of the national apparatus. The version promoted by the soldiers who ruled Ghana much of the time when I was there declared: “One nation, one people, one destiny.” The message reflects a government trying to represent itself to its diverse polity in the mastery of social conditions and modern realities within the country; outside the country, the message asserts the position of the national apparatus to represent the country in relations with other countries and to conduct deals with international corporations that are themselves looking for advantage and profit and are well-positioned to do so. The rhetoric of national unity, and the amount of time and energy spent promoting it, suggest a degree of overselling, even hype, particularly when there are many in the national elite, like many of their colonial predecessors, who, in one songster’s words, are doing well by doing good.⁷ They are pushing the idea of development, productivity, and access to the goods of the global market. Fela Anikulapo Kuti wrote songs about the worst

types of players in the development of Africa: “I.T.T. (International Thief Thief)” and “V.I.P. (Vagabonds in Power),”⁸ and the believers laugh and sing along and dance. There are many good people trying to solve the problems that accompany the creation of a nation within the world order, but Ghana is a reality that tests the best intentions of those charged with its realization, and while very few people would express direct resistance to the notion of the nation, there is a great deal of disaffiliation among many of Ghana’s citizens. To many, Ghana is just another historical actor, whom they personify as “Government” and who does things to them.

Not long ago, after nations like Ghana had appeared on the international scene, a leading anthropologist and commentator on modernization made the seemingly odd suggestion that one way the culture of a place can be interpreted is as “an assemblage of texts,” that a cultural event is like “a story [people] tell themselves about themselves.”⁹ On a simple level, the analogy seemed fruitful because a story has its own kind of logic, and its characters are true to themselves within that context. The suggestion lent itself to efforts to describe the meanings that culture has to people in deep traditional settings, and the suggestion also lent itself to efforts to reach into the hearts of people in modern situations of competing loyalties. In the pluralistic societies of the Third World, the issues that are personally meaningful within traditional cultures are usually considered to be less important than the economic development of the national entity within the global system. For many people, however, a commitment to traditionalism surpasses issues of national conformity: when those people who have limited participation in the modernization process and its benefits evaluate their own stories, they are more comfortable with and even defensive about their traditional contexts. Their view of what is meaningful and important emerges in reactionary frameworks, typically religious or cultural. They are aware that their lives are increasingly influenced by distant forces, and they recognize that, like previous colonial authority, national authority over their forms of social organization will accelerate the decline of their way of life. In their reaction, they articulate varying degrees of disaffiliation as well as varying levels of resistance as they seek to preserve their traditions.

The idea of seeing Accra as “an assemblage of texts” is useful because Accra is not one story but a gathering of many stories, scribbled stories of unclear relevance and questionable meaning. Exactly where the full assemblage of Accra texts should be shelved on the symbolic stacks is not a problem for us: we can file our texts on a short shelf labeled “Ghana” without a second thought. But for the people who live there, Accra, like Ghana, is still forthcoming, a frustrating rough draft in the hands of manuscript editors anxious to show that they know better than

the authors. In a place like Accra, the concepts social scientists use to describe African urban life, like the negotiation of reality within situational fields, make a lot of sense. Accra, a gathering of stories, is not even one place but a gathering of many places. One cannot see all of Accra at once, for it appears in bits and pieces, clusters and networks, and much of the context of Accra lies outside of Ghana. What is its meaning? What does it represent? As an unreadable up-to-date assemblage of local and international cultural texts, of contingency and ambiguous relativism, Accra presents a postmodernist's dream *assemblage*, a literary pastiche of free-floating signifiers.¹⁰ Accra frustrates those who yearn for the comfort of order and the security of understanding. But for some reason, it seems that every educated person you talk to, Ghanaian or expatriate, is completely confident in his or her ideas about the place. Accra is a playground for believers and for up-to-date interpreters of challenging texts. There are so many stories that a modern Socrates who drove the myth-makers and story-tellers from the marketplace would find himself alone at the symposium, with no one to execute him, to be sure, but also with no one to drink under the table. The government of Dr. Kofi Busia tried to reduce the cacophony in the late 1960s by forcing out the aliens from other African states, but this xenophobic dark side of the Ghanaian story remains an outer pole of the symposium's pivotal disposition. In this Third World marketplace of ideas and sentiments, stories and myths, intruding upon and in competition with the stories of traditional cultures, the story of Ghana appears in the context of history, that is, what militant African-American poets used to call His-story.

Within the modernist rhetoric of the elite and their international counterplayers, in the emergent mythology of development and nationalism, the story of "history" presents itself as a newer and truer story of what life is all about, a more objective account of what has power to organize or orient people's lives. The Europeans left Ghana and left: Ghana. That is history, a story people tell themselves. History says that the voice of the African people cried out and gave birth to nationalist movements, that they threw off the yoke of colonialism and created the emerging states. It seems equally likely that the people who had just brought us the Second World War looked in the mirror of their civilization and figured that the story of history was just too hard to believe, let alone preach. They left, a few in shame, a few to work on the next blockbuster, most just knocked this way and that by the tail of the beast. The system remained to fulfill its role in the historical story, with its Kiplings replaced by a choral group drawn from the same diverse backgrounds as in earlier eras, ranging from discipline-minded military men to idealists to corporate advance men, but nowadays all singing in different keys.

Let us pity the poor politicians. What a difficult story they have to sell. Though well-armed with old-fashioned scientific optimism and its by-products, even the best among them despair for his-story's relevance, and they struggle with the bureaucratic imperatives that dictate plot and impose character over their personal inspiration. History demands that a new truth is to be advanced, that the way people live and their parents and grandparents lived is not appropriate for them, that they need new symbols and better myths, new identities, new vehicles for dealing with reality. The grand narrative of modern history presents a negative and narrow view of indigenous cultural stories as myths and pre-scientific ways of thinking. Under the momentum of modern history, those older cultural stories — that is, the traditional myths by which folk lived in the past, their traditional truths — are to be rationalized or displaced. Who is buying it? It appears that the multitudes, especially the young, have embraced the urban life by choice. Perhaps the countryside has changed, and the life of a village farmer has been changed into that of a wage laborer or a perennial agricultural debtor. Perhaps the weakened hierarchies and weakened family authorities of the traditional societies have lost their charisma and their attractiveness. Of course, the tellers of the historical story also have their devices. Technology is wonderful and lends itself with marvelous plasticity to mythical hopes and mythical discourse. Certainly, very few people in Accra or the countryside will debate the benefits of modern media, assuming they are available. Very few will debate the benefits of antibiotics. Everybody likes running water and electricity and taxis.

But as for the rest of the story, many people are not convinced by the arguments that elaborate funeral customs squander their resources and impoverish them, that family planning will help them in the future, that soldiers are there to protect them, that commodity marketing boards are working to enrich them, that civil servants are not civil masters, that surgical operations are a legitimate way to cure them, that criminals are best kept in jails and mad people in asylums, that education will encourage their children to be good citizens, that courts and lawyers will solve their disputes correctly, that money is something to save and not spend, that technological efficiency is all that is needed to stand for culture and replace traditional myths. Most of them are prepared to join the observers of the creation of the alternative modern society only to debate whether the process is a compelling historical drama or just a mess. Maybe most of them know what the international experts have long said, that even with the benefits of nationalism, they will never catch up and never be rich, and that whatever relative wealth is generated by development is likely to be gobbled up by a well-placed few. In a poor country like Ghana, people are prepared to deal with technology, but they really have not got the money to pay for very much of the historical story. The

urban believers are prepared to make huge sacrifices for media devices and new sounds, but the traditionalists of the Fourth World are more aware of the price to be paid. The traditionalists are not willing to change much for the type of life being offered to them far in the future at the end of a stick. They do not see the same future, and they wish to attach only some parts of the modern dream to their treasured heritages, to the extent it fits with the lifestyles they have been taught to respect.

Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, who led Ghana to independence, was a visionary who made Ghana a symbol of enlightenment to many citizens of African nations. But Nkrumah was not Gandhi, and though Nkrumah evidently knew quite a bit of Gandhi's story, Nkrumah's story was not to be the same. Nonetheless, Nkrumah probably would have known that Gandhi was teaching something to complement the truth-force of *satyagraha* when he sat at his spinning-wheel and insisted that his followers do the same, setting an example not merely of *karma-yoga* but also of liberation from their own historical story. Like visionaries of other times and places, Nkrumah believed that there were special qualities in African cultures that could save emergent African states from the patterns of world history. Now, many years after his time, we are less inclined to such hopes. It has been argued that people in the Western world cannot control their technocracy and its momentum, and whether that argument is valid or not, it is less and less easily dismissed. Whatever the extent we control the momentum of our history, it is certainly the case that people in Ghana have not got much control over it. Gandhi's intellectual friends looked at him spinning cotton and thought his mania anachronistic and out of pace with national and international forces,¹¹ but there are many people in Ghana who would have understood Gandhi's reverence for his spinning-wheel. The historical story is a dominating story, but it is not the only relevant story, not even the only relevant history. It can be told with forceful persuasiveness or ironic insinuation, but it does not compel affection and its truth is always at least partially suspect to a living person. In Yeats' poetic vision, its orbit is centrifugal; turning and turning, it widens to encompass what is not inside it,¹² until its axis shifts, its bearing upon life is betrayed, its vision is fragmented. Sitting on our small modern world, we know our location to be relative in a galaxy among galaxies cast out within a larger universe of warped space and time. Yet knowing that, when we behold how history's vain inclusiveness — that we are its avatars and the world as we know it is its culmination — is transparently and unflatteringly measured against the troubled present and threatened future, there is no liberation.

For people who live in Ghana, Ghana itself is basically an entity that represents them in their relations with the world, for better or for worse. Several

millions, a significant percentage, have left Ghana and spread around the world, seeking better-paying historical situations through the migratory possibilities of globalization. Within that international diaspora, their identity is more easily comprehended as Ghanaian than ethnic. Within Ghana itself, whatever the future holds for the incursion of the historical story into the lives of Ghanaians, a small measure of its extent may be found even among the Accra believers, where it is common to hear people resolve situations by saying “We are all Africans” rather than “We are all Ghanaians.” The latter cliché may be expressed during political elections, international sporting events, development initiatives, or expatriate gatherings, but it is not common to hear someone say in private, “I am a Ghanaian first and an Ashanti (or Dagbana or Ewe or whatever) second.” Even for those who have found their advantaged places of participation in the globalized society, their fealty to Ghana as such seems a secondary concern to their efforts to look out for themselves. The bonds of family and culture still weigh on them with authority. Those on the margins also know where they stand.

In Ghana as elsewhere, the historical story is unconvincing and unsatisfying because it is narrow and overconfident and unsympathetic. History is continuously recentering itself in an interplay of rippling circles, and circles within circles. People try to meet it on their own terms and revise it with their own inventory of motives. After all, who does not have to achieve distance from history to become a person of a particular time and place? Some fight, some flee, some seek. There exist people in our world who are blessed with magnificent sense or inner serenity, and some of them are in Accra, but for most, Accra really is I-cry. As Yeats might have seen the place, it is no country for old men.¹³ Thus the pathways to transcendence are crowded in Accra. Yet as the storied roads are many, the traffic is not one way. There are choices. There are paths of social action for those who would build a modest monument or a different stage for the historical story, paths of greed for those who would build high-walled bungalows, paths of prayer for those who would nurture the inner life, paths of indulgence for those who would continually escape into the moment. There are different identities from which national and international historical movement is peripheral and recognized differently, from different centers. There are times and places where one becomes a person in dialogue with a different history.

From the inclusive perspective of global history, it would seem that the world’s traditional cultures are waning moons, their histories mere futile babblings, as irrelevant or derivative as were human sciences like anthropology and psychology in the medieval Age of Faith. Those of us at history’s center do not have many realistic options of alternate histories, and we have difficulty imagining anything outside our history. Regarding those at its periphery, it is as

impolite for us to exclude them as it is impolitic for them to exclude themselves. What is strange about the modern world order, though, is that it has all the characteristics of culture in its own right, for it provides means of access to and participation in broad social processes; but no matter from what vantage point one views it, there is almost always a sense that becoming part of it involves losing or being stripped of something valuable. The triumphant culture — with its apparatus of democratization, individualism, capitalism, nationalism, militarism, bureaucratic organization, literacy, materialism, consumerism, energy consumption, logistics, increased communications, mediated information management, economic and psychological values — is sure of itself in its contact with other cultures. It has been critiqued to death, yet it lives and appropriates even its own critiques. It is unresponsive to the visions of the cultures it overwhelms and forces into orbit, even though it frequently supplies them with new means of sustaining and elaborating their own worlds. Its dominating strength is evident, its engineering is amazing, and its material benefits are undeniable. Very few people feel the less for being inside it or a product of it: why then the sense of loss or threatened loss? The doubt seems to derive from wondering whether the world cultural order, which has helped so many people live so well, is somehow flawed or deficient in a fundamental aspect of culture, that is, culture's premise as a tool for survival. The modern social order seems to be at war with the natural world, exterminating other species and threatening its own survival to sustain its growth. Compared to other cultural traditions, its purposefully materialist view seems short-sighted and limited. Faith in as-yet-ungenerated solutions to current problems elevates a regard for a preordained present that almost touches nostalgia, leading to equivocation with regard to the future. This odd tentativeness, this ironic loss of historical perspective, this abdication of values that could reflect a long-term multigenerational view of community, is sensed in the world's traditional cultures, as clearly as anywhere else, as a crisis.

Notes:

1. Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Three Little Birds," from *Exodus*, Island Records, 1977.
2. Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Natural Mystic," from *Exodus*.
3. See my two-volume work on the post-colonial generation of urban youth: *Hustling Is Not Stealing: Stories of an African Bar Girl* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) and *Exchange Is Not Robbery: More Stories of an African Bar Girl* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
4. I had once had a similarly dazing experience in an encounter with Jiddu Krishnamurti in New York.
5. William Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much with Us; Late and Soon," in *Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, with Memoir and Notes* (New York: American News Company, 188?).
6. The term "Third World," was originally used to distinguish (from capitalist and communist countries) the underdeveloped and non-aligned countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. It is still used to refer to underdeveloped and developing countries. Leo Hamalian and Frederick R. Karl, eds., *The Fourth World* (New York: Dell, 1976); Leslie Wolf-Philips, "Why Third World?" *Third World Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1979), 105-14; cited in Peter Worsley, *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). See also Peter Worsley, *The Third World: A Vital New Force in International Affairs* (n.p.: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964).
7. Tom Lehrer, "The Old Dope Peddler," Lehrer Records (1953).
8. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, "V.I.P. (Vagabonds in Power) ," Kalakuta Records K1LP 001; "I.T.T. (International Thief Thief)," Kalakuta Records KALP 002.
9. Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 448-49.
10. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 148 (July-August, 1984), 53-92.
11. R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 183.
12. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats*, 2nd revised edition, ed. by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Simon & Schuster, Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996), p. 187.
13. William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in *Collected Works*, p. 193.