

# Oyotunji Village, South Carolina

## *Reverse Afropolitanism*



The most conspicuous, and continuous, historical connection of Nigeria to the Americas has been that to Brazil. We encountered it first in chapter 2, with “Mariana’s story,” as drawn from Antonio Olinto’s novel *The Water House*. We were reminded of it in chapter 11, with Wole Soyinka’s escapade to Salvador, old metropolis of Plantation Brazil, to retrieve the *ori olokun* sculpture to the motherland. And Afro-Brazilian family names show up here and there in Nigerian fiction: in Cyprian Ekwensi’s Lagos, as well as in Sarah Ladipo Manyika’s San Francisco. Teju Cole refers to the Brazilian connection as well.

But the Afro-Atlantic extended further northward, with or without direct Nigerian linkages. Here and there in the New World, people of African background established their own communities and adapted to new circumstances. Some of the settlements were formed by escapees from plantation slavery. The settlements in Brazil became known as *quilombos*, sometimes quite sizeable. The overall term for the escapees, in whatever territory they were, became “Maroons.”<sup>1</sup> In Surinam, long-term Dutch colony, the world outside referred to them as “Bush Negroes,” while among themselves they were divided into sizeable collectivities such as the Djuka and the Saramacca. While Maroon settlements were often founded in inaccessible, inland, perhaps mountainous areas where the formerly enslaved could not be easily recaptured, there were places and times where they established some sort of ambiguous coexistence with plantations and local markets. They could be frontier communities of many kinds: sometimes merging with local Amerindian groupings; at other times possibly including outlaws of mixed origins. Their relationships to African ethnic heritages could vary. In Salvador, we have seen, there was a noticeable connection to what would become recognized as Yoruba. In Cuba, too, the Afro-

Catholic beliefs and practices referred to as *Santeria* showed traces of a similar past. Among the Maroons in the hills of Jamaica, there was a stronger ingredient from the Akan cultural groupings of what is now Ghana. In other areas, the mixture of people brought ashore by the slave trade made it more difficult to identify African ethnic linkages. In the Caribbean, too, while the French Revolution and the upheavals that followed were perhaps distracting the European imperial power, the French part of the island of Hispaniola was the site of another revolution, establishing Haiti as the first Black nation in the New World, certainly again with a notable African cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> The revolutionary hero was Toussaint L'Ouverture; when Morayo da Silva, in Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, meets a Caribbean cook named Toussaint in San Francisco, we can perhaps guess whom he had been named after.

Then in the twentieth century, well after the end of slavery, African Americans in the different lands of the New World engaged with African as well as European linkages in various ways. Jamaicans, by now in large part urban proletarians, could reinvent their past by identifying with what had been there forever as an independent African nation, in distant Ethiopia—from where it was really certain that hardly any of their ancestors had come—and become Rastafarians. (Ras Tafari later became better known as Emperor Haile Selassie.) When Surinam was to become independent, its inhabitants could choose between becoming Surinamese and becoming Dutch citizens. So a considerable number moved across the Atlantic to establish themselves in the suburbs of Amsterdam and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> (These migrants were more likely already coastal, metropolitan-oriented urbanites, rather than those inland former “Bush Negroes.”) From the islands of the Caribbean, we have already seen, not so few would head for the United States, where Nigerian migrants such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would keep encountering them.

And then especially as African countries were emerging out of colonialism, African Americans in the United States were also getting more involved with Africa, past and present, in a rich landscape of the imagination and of fact-finding. In the academic discipline of history and in other cultural studies, “Afrocentrism” emerged as a new research genre. In the 1970s, the engagement of African Americans with West African motherlands was stimulated by the author Alex Haley's basically semifictional account, in the book *Roots* (1976), of how he traveled to West Africa and up the Gambia River to find the home of his ancestor Kunta Kinte, who had disappeared from there to be carried in the slave trade to North America. *Roots*, of course,

achieved an even stronger grip on the popular imagination in Black America when it was turned into a TV series as well. (Before *Roots*, Haley had been known primarily as ghostwriter for *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.)

Let us focus now, and finally, on two Black communities in the United States with their particular, and very different, places in an Afropolitan world. Come along to the southeastern United States, from northern Florida through Georgia and South Carolina, into North Carolina. It is an area rich in African American history—a long way from Salvador, Brazil, although somehow not so far.<sup>4</sup>

For one thing, there is an area that may in a way seem reminiscent of those remote lands where Maroons took refuge elsewhere—and yet it is different. It is an area where the traces of an African heritage are noticeable and varied, but instead of being in the inaccessible inland mountains, it is in the similarly hard-to-reach coastal wetlands. This is the home of the people known as Gullah, or Geechee. In the era of slavery, there were rice plantations here. But the climate was unhealthy, so the British or British-descendant owners stayed away much of the time. It did not help either that the slaves brought germs from Africa to which they themselves had some resistance, but to which people of European stock were vulnerable. (We may be reminded of “the white man’s grave” on the other side of the Atlantic, at more or less the same time.) Consequently, the slaves were left a great deal to their own devices. Then, it seems, when the American War of Independence broke out, many of the planters departed for good, as they were British loyalists. So here you had not runaway slaves, but runaway slave owners.

Who were those Gullah, or Geechee? Ideas about the origin of the name “Gullah” seem to be guesswork. Does it derive from “Angola,” rather far south on the West African coast? Or does it come from Gola, an ethnic group in what is now Liberia? Or Dyula, a major grouping with a large West African home territory? It is difficult to say, because here the elements of the African heritage cannot so easily be identified with any particular part of Africa, as once affected by the slave trade. Many of the slaves who ended up in North America did not come straight from the African continent, but by way of the Caribbean islands, where people of different origins were mixed together. It is easier to say where the name “Geechee” came from—apparently from the nearby Ogeechee River.

Along the coast, and on the islands outside it, the Gullah have for an extended period lived on the outskirts of American society and maintained a distinctive culture of their own. Yet again, that

distinctiveness may not have been altogether a consequence of remoteness: like those Maroons elsewhere, they may have been in touch with relative neighbors, where their special skills may have been a marketplace asset in a division of knowledge, and where some other shared ideas and expressions may simply have served them in maintaining a group identity. Those who have migrated into the wider society have tended to become assimilated into Black America more generally, rather than conspicuously sticking to a distinctive identity of their own. But more recently there has been a conscious cultural revitalization, affirming local rights—in the face of the fact that Euro-Americans have been coming back to those shores, to retirement communities with yacht harbors and golf courses. So now there is a Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, officially recognized as a National Heritage Area, with a number of dispersed sites of different kinds. And on 2 July 2000, the Gullah/Geechee nation was proclaimed, with a head of state/queen mother/official spokesperson.<sup>5</sup>

The Gullah cultural heritage—food, textiles, basketry, music, folklore, language—has allowed the growth of public events, tourist sites, and academic scholarship. But the pioneer in the latter was Lorenzo Dow Turner, who from the early 1930s devoted himself to studying the Gullah language.<sup>6</sup>

Turner was the descendant of an educated Black family, although growing up under some economic hardship due to the separation of his parents. His father, a teacher in a school he ran himself, and a man with a temper, got into a fight with a white man who had insulted him, and having hurt that man, he hurriedly fled from the home in North Carolina, never to reunite with his family again. Lorenzo's mother took what remained of the family north, and after finishing high school in Washington, DC, her son entered Howard University there—a leading institution among what would later be classified as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs for short. (These were the schools where early African students such as Nnamdi Azikiwe would have most of their American academic experience.) He would stay there long as a faculty member; but, juggling income sources and scholarly ambitions, he somehow also achieved higher degrees at two institutions that were early in accepting the occasional Black student: he got a master's degree at Harvard, and a doctorate at the University of Chicago.

It was when he was teaching summer school at a small Black college in South Carolina that the idea of doing linguistic research among the nearby Gullah dawned on him. A modest grant allowed him to begin on the project in the summer of 1932. Gullah English, he discovered, was not just “bad English,” the outcome of a lack of education, as people

had tended to think. It was a Creole dialect, with African ingredients of many kinds.

Turner would pursue this research interest in Africanisms in Gullah, in comparable forms elsewhere in the New World, and in African languages, over a very long time and in many ways. In the late 1930s, he went to London for a year at the School of Oriental Studies (not yet “of Oriental and African Studies”—that would come later), the best place to learn more about African languages. Early in the 1940s, in contact with various other American scholars in different disciplines, who had begun to develop parallel interests, he went to Brazil for another year. Perhaps inevitably, he came to spend much of it in Bahia.

While back in the United States, Turner’s career continued to take him mostly through the HBCUs, and the segregation of scholarship also meant that his academic reputation tended to depend on the mediation of colleagues in the white mainstream. Yet finally, in 1949, seventeen years after the beginning of his Gullah research, his book *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* was published by a reputable university press. The immediate reception in the dominant circle of white American linguists was not all favorable, but with time the book became a classic. So here again, it can perhaps be suggested, in the creolizing encounter between African language and English, we may be reminded of both Amos Tutuola (“young English” according to Dylan Thomas) and Ken Saro-Wiwa (“rotten English”).

By this time, Lorenzo Turner had also gained sufficient recognition to be funded (by the recently established Fulbright program) for spending time in West Africa, especially Nigeria. He arrived at Lagos harbor by an Elder Dempster ship in early 1951. It turned out to be another long, physically demanding as well as intellectually rewarding sojourn. Since after his Brazilian experience he was particularly interested in Yoruba language and culture, Ibadan was a natural place to stay, although he took a side trip to Onitsha as well. As the permanent campus of the recently created university was not ready yet, and he could not find a place to stay at the temporary campus, he rented an off-campus chalet. His diary refers to three trips to Abeokuta, with “the Beiers.” One of them was Ulli Beier; Mrs. Beier was Susanne Wenger. And so we are back to chapter 6.<sup>7</sup>

But let us return now to South Carolina, to a place just a little north of the old harbor town of Beaufort, on a forest lane off Highway 21, close to that Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor but not part of it. A roadside sign announces that “You Are Now Leaving the United States of America.” And then another sign says “African Village Oyotunji, as Seen on TV. South Carolina: Smiling Faces, Beautiful Places.”

The story of Oyotunji Village has been told in a (richly theory-laden) ethnography by Kamari Maxine Clarke (2004), Afro-Canadian anthropologist, who did extensive, multi-sited field research there and in the network of places to which, in one way or other, it connects.<sup>8</sup> It is a story beginning with Walter Eugene King, born in Detroit in 1928, leaving his early Baptist faith. He had taken an interest in African culture already as a teenager, and gone to Haiti with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company—Dunham was also trained as an anthropologist. He went to Cuba as well, and back in the United States, he moved to New York, where, toward the end of the 1950s, he initially joined a local Afro-Cuban *Santeria* cult, brought to the United States by migrants from Cuba. After some time, however, King became dissatisfied with the Afro-Catholic tendencies of his adopted religion, and struck out in search of something more authentically African. He read up on what he could find of written historical and anthropological sources on Yoruba religion, combined his new insights with the Black nationalism growing around him, started a Yoruba temple, and renamed himself Adefunmi.

In 1970, with five families accompanying him, Adefunmi moved from New York to South Carolina. After some complications, they managed to buy ten acres of uninhabited land, on which Oyotunji Village was built. Oyotunji means “Oyo rises again”—so the town’s name refers to the old city in northern Yorubaland. Adefunmi was crowned as *Oba*, the Yoruba kingship title. With time, the community grew, as more newcomers became villagers. A wider organized constituency of sympathizers was also cultivated. There was an active branch in the Bronx, New York. Moreover, the idea was to make Oyotunji Village an attractive site for visitors, in times when more Black Americans began taking an interest in an African heritage. Thus an element of cultural commoditization was also involved.

The villagers, then, were reinvented Yoruba, born-again Yoruba. But they did not want their understanding of the ideas and practices of their adopted culture to rely entirely on the writings of outsiders, even white American academics, so they sought contacts in Nigeria and began traveling there. In other words, here was a reverse Afropolitanism: Americans reaching out from their North American periphery to an attractive African center.

Yet the overseas pilgrimage to Yorubaland could be a mixed experience. Indeed, they would find chiefs and priests willing to meet them and engage with them. However, it seems that ordinary locals were not so inclined to see the Oyotunji visitors as real Yoruba; they were referred to as *oyinbo* (which usually means foreigners, white people). On the other hand, the visitors were somewhat unimpressed

by the Africanness of their Nigerian contemporaries. Many of them did not dress right; their life styles were in various ways culturally contaminated; and by now they seemed more or less evenly divided in their religious enthusiasms between Christianity and Islam, in long-established or new forms, with fewer adherents to a pure old-time religion. Returning home to South Carolina, Oyotunji representatives concluded that it was now up to the African Americans to safeguard the purity of Yoruba religion and culture. (Perhaps that most prominent representative of twentieth-century Yoruba cultural power, Wole Soyinka, might sardonically describe such search for timeless purity as “neo-Tarzanism”?)

Time passed. Kamari Maxine Clarke’s recent account of all this had aroused my curiosity, and so, several decades after the founding of Oyotunji Village, when for other reasons I was not so far away from it, I made my own one-day visit there. Indeed the brightly painted single-story houses, with their corrugated zinc roofs around the sandy village square, looked rather like something out of contemporary West Africa. In a moment, a village elder appeared on a bike and agreed to take me around for a modest fee. Wearing a brocade full-length tunic and a folded bag-like cap with short braids sticking out, he looked credibly Yoruba, and he took me to the shrines of different Yoruba gods. At the square where we began, there was a small shrine to Eshu, the trickster, where beer, soft drinks, and candy had been sacrificed, in turn attracting flies and spiders. At one shrine after another, my guide seemed most eager to point out to his foreign visitor that his religion was not that different—all these gods are really much like Christian saints, intermediaries between earthlings and a high god—and do we not all care for our ancestors? He seemed a bit puzzled when this particular visitor turned out to have his own notions of Yoruba religion. On an occasion like this, at least, it appeared that my guide was not so intent on showing that his religion was altogether different.

The tour was not entirely focused on religion. On a wall next to the shrine of Yemoja, female water deity, there was a wall with a painted list of the names of famous women in the history of Africa and its diaspora, ranging from Nefertiti to Josephine Baker, the early twentieth-century entertainer, and Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King. In a way, Oyotunji Village had perhaps become more of an African American theme park.

Next to the Eshu shrine, close to a gift shop, the village bulletin board also hinted that the rejection of America was hardly entirely complete. It showed various newspaper clippings about how Oyotunji had drawn the attention of the surrounding society. One was about

a television appearance of the first oba, the late Adefunmi (who had now been succeeded by one of his sons), on the Oprah Winfrey Show, where he had tried to convince the famous talk show hostess about the advantages of polygamy. (I can imagine Oprah's response.)

On my walk with the village elder, I found the pathways very quiet. I learned that there were not so many permanent resident households left in the village. For people who needed to earn their income in the world outside, the location was inconvenient. Oyotunji has its continued ups and downs, but apparently it had to become more a place to visit, less a place to live.<sup>9</sup>

As it happened, my visit to Oyotunji Village was just a few days after the 2008 American presidential election, and the United States had just elected its first Black president: Barack Obama, Afropolitan Number One. Obama's paternal grandfather had been another "Burma Boy," recruited in his native Kenya to serve the British as they fought their late colonial World War II battles in Southeast Asia.<sup>10</sup> Evidently he was older than most, and the cook for a British officer in Burma and elsewhere rather than a regular soldier. But this traveling experience may have mattered as he sent a son, the new president's father, to go and further his education in faraway United States.

So those precise days may not have been a time when most Black Americans were so inclined to give up on their country.

## Notes

1. Price's (1973) edited book on the Maroons offers a richly varied view of the Maroon populations of the Americas, their history, and the way they were described by contemporary observers.
2. The book *The Black Jacobins* (1938), by the Trinidadian, Black British writer C. L. R. James, about the Haitian Revolution, is an early classic of Black literature: a remarkable work combining social history with event history, local history with transcontinental history. James, active through many decades, remains a central figure in Black Atlantic intellectual history and political thought; the Nigerian American literary and media scholar Akin Adesokan (2011: 56) concludes that "today, as postcolonial intellectuals confront similar problems of making homes and careers in expatriation, the experiences of James and his contemporaries are relevant and useful." I heard James speak once, at the University of Pittsburgh in the early 1970s.
3. I have touched on the Surinamese presence in Amsterdam in an earlier essay (Hannerz 1996: 140–149).
4. We could also remember again Zora Neale Hurston's encounter with a formerly enslaved person, Cudjo Lewis, who had come from Ouidah to



- Alabama, as referred to in chapter 2, note 1—resulting in the belatedly published, biographical *Barracoon* (Hurstun 2018). In 2019, the *New York Times* reported that the wreck of that last slave ship *Clotilda*, on which Cudjo Lewis had arrived in America, had apparently been found a few miles up the Mobile River, close to the neighborhood known as Africatown, established by formerly enslaved people at the end of the American Civil War (Fausset 2019).
5. The Internet web entries on the Gullah and Geechee are by now many and continually changing. See also Matory's (2015: 177–230) critical scrutiny of understandings of Gullah historical isolation.
  6. I draw in what follows on Margaret Wade-Lewis's (2007) biography of Turner.
  7. The Alake of Abeokuta, traditional chief, asked Turner if he could help his son get to a college in the United States; if that really happened, it would be the beginning of another Afropolitan. As far as Turner's further career in the United States was concerned, it would finally take him to a position at Roosevelt University, Chicago, a recently established institution catering to a multiethnic student body. Here, in 1958, as Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah of newly independent Ghana visited Chicago, Lorenzo Dow Turner was one of his hosts. Turner retired officially in 1966, and died in 1972.
  8. Commander (2017: 173–219) discusses the Gullah/Geechee as well as Oyotunji Village more briefly in her transdisciplinary study of the reawakened interest in African culture among Black Americans, noting for one thing the early doubts about the village among longer-time residents in the area. In another recent monograph on Yoruba-inspired religion in the New World, focusing on Trinidad, Castor (2017: 158–166) briefly describes a visit by Oba Adejuyigbe Adefunmi II, the son of the founder of Oyotunji Village and his successor as chief there, at a Trinidadian, strongly transnational, ritual event in 2012.
  9. In an article published a few years after her monograph, Kamari Maxine Clark (2007) also notes that Yoruba religious revivalism has become increasingly based on the networks of a transnational diaspora rather than on any particular local site.
  10. On Burma Boys from Nigeria, see chapter 14. Barack Obama's (2004: 408–409) early book *Dreams from My Father* (with a first edition published in 1995), including a description of his own rather youthful journey back to his deceased father's homeland in western Kenya, portrays his grandfather's character and life experience. Obama (2004: 382) also notes that one of his Kenyan kinsmen quoted Chinua Achebe to him: "When two locusts fight, it is always the crow who feasts." One may read Obama's own account of his Kenya journey, and then reflect on David Remnick's (2010: 62) comments on where it fits into his passage to the presidency—where Remnick also describes Obama's father's life after returning to Kenya as that of a "been-to," struggling to reconcile the mindsets of home and the West. Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker* magazine, has his understanding of the been-to from the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, and it fits well with what was said in chapter 7 about the been-to as a mid-twentieth-century tragic figure.

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