The Beauty of a Misunderstood Race:  
Moral Revolution within the Space of African Antiquity and the African Diaspora

Africa’s past is a profound mix of enchanting history, variegated cultures, mosaic peoples whose ways of life are as varied as the disparate peoples who inhabit the continent. From the civilization of the Neolithic Age, an age when the area now occupied by the Sahara Desert was noted as fertile land that produced the Neolithic people whose discovery and work with iron gave birth to the Iron Age, to the civilization of the Nile Valley and beyond, respect was the defining matrix from which those cultures sprang. Indeed, respect as it is, allows individuals to co-habit mutually in peace and equanimity of mind. As history teaches us, the dearth of reverence for one another’s space, time, culture, and race, on numerous occasions, led to cataclysmic conflicts, both on mass scales and on individual basis.

Respect, consequently, is an immanent universal human trait. In Kwame Anthony Appiah’s The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Are Made, he accentuates this fact. As he points out, “At the heart of honor is this simple idea; having honor means being entitled to respect.” (13) As it is, there is no honor without respect; there is no enduring glory without respect, and there is no lasting progress without respect. When one thinks deeply about it, the lack of respect forms the basis of humanity’s perpetual problems. Indeed, Appiah elides that at the heart of every revolution lies honor. He then asks, “What is an honor code?” He responds to his own question and states: “Though it matters morally what we think and feel, morality is, at its heart, what we do…. Revolution is a mega change in a short time, so a moral revolution has to involve a rapid transformation in moral behavior, not just in moral sentiments.” (Appiah xi)

It is within the context of Appiah’s definition of moral revolution being a dramatic evolvement in moral behavior that the topic is addressed from African antiquity to the Diaspora. In this sense, I argue that dismantling female circumcision in many parts of Africa, Pan Africanism, Decolonization, hip hop, and the election of President Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States are moral revolutions that shook the foundations of historical frameworks.

The need for a discourse that effectively deals with and presents moral revolution as a vehicle that engenders change and progress could not have come at a more pragmatic time in the collective histories of the globe. Indeed, when one mentions revolution, what immediately strikes one is a practical move embedded in cataclysm and rabidity, a move that is quick, precise, and swift but also violent. Revolutions, such as the American Revolution (1776), the French Revolution (1789), the Haitian Revolution (1791), the Russian Revolution (1917), and the Cuban Revolution (1959) readily come to mind as some of the violent uprisings that pioneered change at the expense of precious human lives. However, the addition of “moral” to “revolution” makes it a beautiful undertaking that appeals to the heart, to reason, and more crucially, to ethics.
In December of 2010, history was revisited in Tunisia when Mohammed Bouazizi, a vendor in Tunis incinerated himself in protest against police corruption after police officers seized and confiscated his merchandise for selling without a license. Bouazizi’s suicide quickly spread like a wildfire on social media networks, and before the rest of the world knew what was happening, Algerian President Zine al-Abidine bin Ali had been chased out of the country by the people of Tunisia. Thus, Bouazizi’s protest became the tinder-box that set autocratic governments ablaze in North Africa and the Middle-East.

Egypt, known for its revolutions, both moral and cataclysmic, followed suit with Hosni Mubarak stepping down in February after forty years of despotic rule during which he was supported by Emergency Laws. Today, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, and Libya are all experiencing the dire need to let freedom and liberty reign, to let justice flow and allow citizens of those countries to decide what works best for them. But, Gaddafi is so drunk with power that like the eighteenth century politician, Patrick Henry, he is screaming that he should be given his “Libya or Death”. And the beat goes on.

How did moral revolutions begin? Basil Davidson in his book, *African Civilization Revisited* (1991), informs readers that the earliest form of civilization began in the Neolithic Age. The salience of going back to antiquity to trace the historical brilliance of moral revolutions could not have been accentuated more by Davidson. As he points out, “The myth of the Negro past has begun to join a number of others of its kind. An intelligent view of human change and progress in Africa must now reach back to the most remote antiquity.” (10) However, not much is known about the Neolithic people because nobody could interpret what is believed to be their art and writing. What is known, however, is that they were the first to experiment with iron. Their work with the solid metal led to many inventions that they used in warfare. As the area started becoming arid, there started a dispersion of people both north and south of the Sahara. The first documented moral revolution consequently is known to have begun in the Nile Valley around 2,800 B.C.E. Some authors have this figure to be around 2,500 B.C.E. Anyway, Ptah-Hotep, the first known philosopher, who was also the vizier of the Nile Valley, came up with a set of rules to be obeyed by the people of the Nile Valley to ensure peaceful co-existence among them.

Ptah-Hotep enjoined his people to refrain from stealing, coveting other people’s concubines, respect for one another, obedience to the gods, and abstaining from greed, among other vices. However, among his injunctions, Ptah-Hotep emphasized that greed was the greatest evil of all. The wisdom in that injunction could not have had a more terrible impact on Wall Street just a couple of years ago when brazen and ravenous behavior by some corporate executives nearly brought the nation to its knees economically. Respect and abstention from greed, therefore, become the two most quintessential moral legacies that Ptah-Hotep left for the human race from antiquity.
Another legacy from antiquity is circumcision. Initially, only males were mandated to be circumcised, but after the Egyptians were conquered by the forces of Islam in the seventh century, female genital mutilation, as it is commonly known, became part of Egyptian lifestyle. The Prophet Mohammed had decreed that before there could be any sexual intercourse between two consenting adults, they must not only be married, but also, both must be circumcised. Female genital mutilation, consequently, was practiced in Egypt and other places where Islam is practiced for thousands of years until the early 1970s when it started being excoriated in the West. In 2007, Egypt finally banned the practice after a young woman who had undergone the painful ordeal executed by a quack doctor, died from complications.

Today, many countries on the continent of Africa, out of what Appiah describes as “collective shame”, have either formally banned the practice or do not condone it out of reverence for women. I must add that Alice Walker exposed the crudity of female circumcision in her book, Possessing the Secret of Joy, which was published in 1992. Possessing the Secret of Joy is a modernist novel in which hegemony, patriarchy, and feminism converge to expose an obnoxious practice in an African village in expectation of dismantling the antiquated tradition that informs the novel.

In Possessing the Secret of Joy, Walker reverses the African American mode of storytelling, and for the first time since the tumultuous sixties, she brings into the open a dated African practice that was continuing to deprive women in the village of their liberties. Indeed, the problem—female genital mutilation—extends far beyond the narrow confines of the fictional African village of Olinka where the story is initially set. It is a critique of the tradition wherever it is practiced. In Olinka culture, women are marginalized, and to compound the problem of their marginalization, they must conform to institutionalized violence by way of having their genitals mutilated.

During the shooting of a movie in Kenya, Walker came into contact with the practice of female circumcision. Feeling appalled with what she discovered, she decided to expose the practice through the fascination and magic of literature. In fact, Walker, in deciding to represent the rite of passage of circumcision in Possessing the Secret of Joy, “understood racial differences in behavior, custom, and outlook to be products of different social environments and histories.”

In the protagonist, Tashi, readers see a woman who is, initially, grounded in the tradition of the village, as she defends their customs and chastises Blacks in the Diaspora for assimilating Western culture and values.

To announce her intention of creating something new, Walker begins Possessing the Secret of Joy with an epigram: “This Book is Dedicated / With Tenderness and Respect / To the Blameless/ Vulva.” Tashi is an epitome of the fragmented individual, and she exhibits elements of a disjointed subjectivity from the time she gives birth to a retarded son, which was the result of the shrinkage of her vulva after the mutilation of her clitoris. Indeed, her gamut subjectivity is so tormented by her fragmentation that she becomes neurotic. However, through her madness,
she is made whole again as she retaliates by killing the witch-doctor in Olinka who performed the circumcision.

The dismantling of the walls surrounding female circumcision in Africa is a pandemic moral revolution that has saved the lives of millions of young adolescent girls. From eyewitness accounts, some women who defiantly refused to kowtow to the antiquated practice by fleeing from their societies, remarkably assisted in telling the unmitigated anguish, pain, and torture young women before them had endured in the process. At this juncture, one may be tempted to ask what female circumcision is. Female circumcision is the practice where the clitoris of a young girl is severed, allegedly to circumvent her from having an excessive libidinal drive for sex. In cultures where it is practiced, the people believe that a circumcised female is saved from unnecessary coital desire that could lead to cheating, fornication, and adultery, so if a woman is, thus, circumcised, she is saved from being the subject of a marital or relationship disruption. But, as Walker reveals in her novel, a woman who is circumcised as such could have a smaller than usual vulva that could lead to complications in child birth, and sometimes, she may experience excessive pain during sexual intercourse. Thus, I shift my attention from female genital mutilation to colonization, Pan Africanism, and Decolonization.

Colonization is simply defined as the appropriation of land and other economic resources, such as gold and diamond by an imperial power in the land of the colonized through coercion. Under the pretext of civilizing indigenous populations and converting them to Christianity, imperial powers, of which the most dominant were France, Britain, Spain, and Portugal, went to the colonized nations on friendly terms and took advantage of the indigenous populations’ hospitality to marginalize them in their own lands. According to Davidson, the first white visitors to Africa described the people as warm and friendly, but the continent itself was a harbinger of monstrous animals. As he explains, “With colonialism the white person’s view [of Africa] had become contemptuous. If medieval Europeans thought that monsters inhabited Africa, they nonetheless respected the Africans they knew, and they respected them as equals: an attitude that was first engulfed and then forgotten during the ferocious years of the oversea slave trade.” (Davidson 10)

During the Atlantic Slave Trade, in order to gain public opinion in their favor, the colonizers decided rather atrociously to denigrate black people as barbaric savages, who needed to be brought under the benign wings of civilization by converting them into Christianity. Historian Melville Herskovits went as far as categorizing black people as monstrous savages without a history, without a past. From that perspective, a group of people without a history means the group is perennially doomed to child-like behavior and so could not be treated like adults; therefore, they do not deserve to be accorded any civic rights (quoted in Davidson 10). That idea gained firm ground from the 1830s onwards, a period Davidson describes as the beginning of racism.
Colonization began in earnest on the continent at the twilight stages of the nineteenth century when the Atlantic Slave Trade was at its twilight zone. In what became known as the “Scramble for Africa,” Germany, France, and Britain and to a smaller extent Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Belgium shared African countries among them during “The Berlin Treaty of 1885” and competed vehemently for the continent’s spoils. Thus, by the beginning of the twentieth century, France had gained access to colonize many countries in Africa, including Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Chad, Niger, Central African Republic, Gabon, Côte d’Ivoire, Algeria, Benin, Algeria, and Tunisia, among others. Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Namibia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Lesotho, South Africa, Botswana, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, formerly known as Rhodesia, fell under the colonial gaze of the British. However, by the end of 1960, the majority of these nations had gained their independence from their imperial masters. But, the harm had already been done.

In what Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci describe as “Interpellation,” the colonial root had woven so deeply into the cultures and lifestyles of these peoples that they had swayed from the compassionate conservatism, respect, and communal love for one another that Ptah-Hotep preached five thousand years ago. Instead, greed has replaced compassion; dissension and patronization of adults have replaced the need for respect, and corruption and lavish living have replaced frugality. Davidson affirms that colonization came at a “huge cost to many peoples and with a social and human wastefulness that was characteristic of its times. The colonial system shattered the traditional molds of Iron Age society, opened Africa to all the winds that blow and left her peoples to the enormous task of building entirely new ways of life.” (24) The building of entirely new ways of life by Africans has come with its own struggles, disenchantment, and disillusionment.

Franz Fanon succinctly foreshadowed the discombobulating state of Africa after colonization. He admonished in 1958:

> Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land, and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie. (quoted in Nwafor xxxix)

In short, post-colonization and decolonization are classic cases of putting new wine in the same old bottle. As Sipho Buthelezi of South Africa explains, “The post-colonial state after political independence, inherited the essential characteristics of predecessors and only changed the composition of the managers and functionaries of the state, but not the form, content, and character of the institutions anchored in the colonial era.” (quoted in Mayson 90)
Indeed, the state and conditions of many African countries today would have been a huge disappointment to men like W.E.B. DuBois (the founder and brain behind the dynamism of the Pan African Movement), George Padmore also known as Malcolm Nurse (the man who nurtured and groomed many of the Pan Africanists), Kwame Nkrumah, the man who led Ghana to independence in 1957; Peter Abrahams of South Africa, Sékou Touré, Guinea’s first president at independence in 1958; Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, and Sylvanus Olympio of Togo. All these former African leaders fought relentlessly to ensure Africa extricated itself from the colonial stain and stare. Indeed, the Pan African Movement became a necessity to ensure that African nations were not caught in the web of the two superstructures back then, America and the former Soviet Union. Padmore elucidates the need for the non-aligned status of the newly emerging independent African nations:

Pan-Africanism draws considerable inspiration from the struggles of the national freedom movements of the Asian countries, and subscribes to the Indian doctrine of non-violence as a means of attaining self-determination and racial equality. It rejects the unbridled system of monopoly and capitalism of the West no less than the political and cultural totalitarianism of the East. It identifies itself with the neutral camp, opposed to all forms of oppression and racial chauvinism—white or black—and associates itself with all forces of progress and goodwill. (xvi)

In fact, Padmore declared boldly that no African nation should allow itself to become a pawn in the political chess game between America and the Soviet Union. However, the fiery drive to remain neutral soon became an illusion to many African nations as the hopes entertained after independence eviscerated, so the struggle still continues for the majority of African nations.

Author of Why Africa Matters, Cedric Mayson seems to argue that the harm was not done just on political and cultural institutions in Africa but to spirituality as well. He laments the appalling harm of colonialism’s disorienting power to spirituality and points out that “the religious institutions that bestraddle Africa today have inevitably been heavily influenced by colonialism, and the spiritual life of the continent is engaged in a major liberation struggle. Many [Africans] rejoice in looking beyond both their primal spiritual origins and subsequent colonial developments.” (157) This look beyond the horizon by many Africans is still encased in uncertainty, and is a grotesque dearth of the promise of a bright future.

Long before the Pan-African Movement took off, however, the Maroons of Jamaica had taught the British a lesson in revering human dignity by escaping from enslavement into the mountains from where they constantly came to harass the settlers. Padmore observes that the Maroons refused to accept their condition as slaves and for 150 years became “the inspirers of every slave revolt on the island”. (10) The moral cause of the Maroons unnerved the British, so the Maroons, mostly from the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Nigeria were allowed to practice their ethnic customs. As Padmore points out, “These self-governing communities were administered according to African tribal laws and customs under recognized chieftains, such as
the famous Captain Cudjoe, Captain Accompong, Captain Kofie, Captain Quako, and Captain Johnny.” (11)

Another moral revolution worthy of note occurred in London in 1772 when James Somerset, a Negro, contested his status as a slave in court. With the aid of a British abolitionist, Granville Sharpe, Somerset was able to solicit the legal services of Francis Hargrave who successfully defended the accused against his West Indian slave master, Charles Stewart. The judge, Lord Mansfield, ruled in favor of Somerset and declared that from that time henceforth, any slave who set foot on English soil was free. Lord Mansfield’s ruling resulted in the freedom of some 14,000 to 15,000 blacks, who were living in England at the time. Slavery, however, still existed in the British colonies for over sixty years until it was finally abolished in 1834.

In spite of the disenchantment that came with decolonization in many Caribbean and African nations, many of the plans that helped African nations disentangle themselves from the cloak of colonialism, were hatched in the Diaspora. London, Marseilles, Brussels, and New York City played crucial roles as geographical sites of decolonization by serving as the hub of meetings and rendezvous to enable black people to reclaim their lost identities that had been tarnished, distorted, and disfigured by slavery and colonialism. In fact, Davidson’s assertion that racism did not start until the 1830s is quite interesting and revealing because it is around the same time that MINSTRELSY wormed its way into the consciousness and imagination of mainstream Americans.

According to Marion Riggs’s Emmy Award winning documentary, Ethnic Notions, an impressive documentary that explains the origins and desensitization of anti-black stereotypes, in 1828, an Irish comedian, Thomas Rice, who responded to the moniker, “Ethiopian Delineator”, saw a crippled black man dancing by shuffling his feet on a slave plantation. The cripple was shuffling his feet because to dance and cross one’s feet in antebellum America was illegal, a ban that came into effect in 1690, so to avoid being accused of breaking the law, the enslaved crafted a clever way of dancing by shuffling their feet. Later that evening, Rice painted his face with soot, and he went and parodied the dance of the cripple and called it Jim Crow Dance. Rice’s mimicry of the cripple began the minstrelsy epoch. Furthermore, Rice did not limit his negative parody of blacks to the United States but crossed the Atlantic Ocean and performed in Britain also.

Jim Crow was the name given to blacks on plantations. The Jim Crow Dance soon became a hit and in 1843, just around the same time Abolitionists were fortifying their efforts to end slavery, many minstrel groups were formed, and they performed in theaters to indicate that black people were not ready for freedom. Soon, the minstrel shows morphed into a vicious mimicry of black people with the invention of negative caricatures like the facetious Sambo, the languid Coon, the livid Mammy, the stupid Uncle Tom, the dyspeptic Uncle Remus, the convivial Aunt Jemima, the noble savage Picaninny, the unimpressive Zip Coon, the Disparaging Buck, and the Rampaging Rambo.
These negative stereotypes initially portrayed blacks as lazy, carefree, happy-go-lucky, and faithful retainers, who were contented with the servile roles they were playing in society, so their enslavement should be perpetuated. The groveling and dehumanizing images appeared in the major news media of the time, including the first successful motion picture, *Birth of a Nation*. This movie was released in 1915, fifty years after slavery had ended, so the docile black stereotype was transformed into a vicious savage who went about raping white women. The Mammy was depicted as an asexual, diligent, pitch-black woman, who invariably sported a scarf on her head, and she was very protective of her master’s house. Aunt Jemima was the ever-happy woman who derived tremendous joy from cooking for the master. The black child was presented as a picaninny, a young noble savage, who went around partly or totally naked with the hair raised like wires and eyes popping like popcorns. Of course, the black child was presented in that mortifying state to deprive it of any sympathy from liberal-minded whites.

These images became a constant diet that was fed to many whites, especially in the South, some of whom had not come into contact with blacks before, so they accepted the message being carried by the stereotypical images as the gospel truth. Indeed, some of the negative images were so deeply entrenched on the psyches and imaginations of people that according to Barbara Christian, even some blacks started believing that the negative images were, indeed, a true representation of blacks, so they started believing it themselves. Thus, they became victims by virtue of “interpellation.” As a result, the hip-hop movement was seemingly created to efface prevailing notions in black communities of racial superiority. The images of beautiful, sexy black women in movies and on television are to debunk the notion of the asexual Mammy who was portrayed as lacking in sexual allure. The sagging pants and bare-chested artists are to reverse the image of the zip coon who was portrayed as a well-dressed black man, who tried rather unsuccessfully to please white folks with his sartorial brilliance, and lyrics that preached violence seemingly disorient the notion of the docile black man.

Thus, hip-hop has become a moral revolution that is scaling racial and cultural barriers. It must, however, be noted that rap music is just one section of the five categories of hip hop. The others are fashion, disc jockeying, graffiti, and master/mistress of ceremony. My only concern about the categories is that education was forgotten to be included in it. Is it any wonder, therefore, that many black males are still dropping out of high school? And many young black males are still languishing in prison rather than occupying their rightful places within the fruitful confines of tertiary educational institutions. However, the reality is that hip hop has become a moral revolution, a way of life, not just in America but across the globe.

Before the genesis of hip hop, however, W.E.B. DuBois remarkably played a crucial role in helping demystify the superiority of whiteness with his scientific dissection of the “Negro Problem” in America. As Padmore asseverates:

Dubois exposed the myth of racial superiority expounded by such pseudo-biologists as Arthur de Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and Lothrop
Stoddard, the ideological father of Adolf Hitler and the racialists [sic] of America and South Africa. By helping to eliminate the servile mentality and Uncle Tom attitude, which were to be found quite widely among Negroes right up to the First World War, Du Bois contributed in large measure to the awakening militancy of colored people. (86)

It is within the same context that President Barack Obama’s victory in 2008 must be viewed as a moral revolution to subvert prevailing negative notions of the black figure. President Obama is the exact antithesis of the soul-shattering, dehumanizing, denigrating, and debasing stereotypes portrayed as the true characteristics of black people in the past. Obama is bright, articulate, diligent, compassionate, courageous, perspicacious, and a genius who earned his undergraduate and law degrees from Ivy League schools. He is what, initially, mainstream society thought would be an elusive characterization of the black man; however, Obama rose like an eagle and soared majestically to victory in 2008, and he is looking forward to repeating the dosage in 2012. Barack Obama is a man of the people, for the people, by the people.

Clearly, the black race is a misunderstood race, and out of that misunderstanding, a grievous harm was done to it by men of diabolic intentions. In the words of Richard Wright, some white men “have never understood the color problem. The black man is a strange situation.” (xxii) However, out of the chaos has arisen a new order; out of the disfiguration has come perfection, and out of the distortions has come a refashioning and recreation of a new black man prepared and willing not to only lead the world but also to redeem it from past transgressions.

Samuel Doku
Department of English
Howard University

Works Cited


