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# Changing Orisa Worship: Anti-White/Christian Ideology and the Black Relationships with Africa in the Yoruba American Socio-Religious Movement

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## Introduction

### 1. Who is a Yoruba American?

This paper looks at the socio-religious movement organized by Yoruba Americans. Yoruba Americans in this paper are defined as African Americans worshipping *Orisa* (African Yoruba gods)<sup>1</sup> and practicing Yoruba religion/culture. It is not the center of the issue, however, whether their ancestors in effect came from Yorubaland or not. Yoruba is one of the three largest peoples in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, West Africa. Yoruba people live extensively from the southwest part of Nigeria, the east part of the People's Republic of Benin, and to a part of the Republic of Togo. These areas are called Yorubaland (Smith 1988).

This paper scrutinizes two theoretical issues concerning African American social movements. The Yoruba American socio-religious movement is one of African American social movements.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about Orisa, see Awolalu (1979).

<sup>2</sup> Social movement in this paper means any movement that tries to bring changes to an established socio-political system, an orientation of the system, or social values proliferated by the system. Among social movements the socio-religious movement, particularly, means the one emphasizing religious practices (worship rituals, belief, or cosmology) for its formation. The juxtaposition of two similar terms social and socio-religious act in this paper is to indicate the differences between them. In other words, it aims not only to clarify the distinct aspects of the Yoruba American socio-religious act so as to explore its potentialities, but also to scrutinize the theoretical issues in the African American social act. In doing so, this paper intends to reveal inimitable points of the Yoruba American act.

## 2. Blackness as an act of resistance?

First, this paper intends to provide a critique of the representation of blackness as an act of resistance. What is the significance of blackness as practiced by African Americans in the US? A practice of blackness can be represented as an act of resistance to oppressor, or a socio-political system of the US and its values (hereafter White/Christian system and values).<sup>3</sup> The representation of a practice of blackness as an act of resistance, on the one hand, would provide such benefits as the transformation of the subjugated (*objects*) into individuals released from the values of oppressor (*Subject*).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it would create an invariable dichotomy in society of “black/white” matching respectively with “the oppressed/oppressor.”

If any of African American acts were represented as a practice of blackness, all of their acts would be reduced to an issue of the oppressed against oppressor, or White/Christian system and values. To avoid seen as the oppressed, African Americans would be inevitably required to remove their blackness. This process might transform African Americans socially, politically, culturally, and even physically. To make matters worse, this process would result in idiotic pseudo-logic: “Why do African Americans who are supposed to own blackness lose their blackness? It is because that blackness is positioned as inferior to White/Christian system and values by natural selection or competitive principles in the US society.” As a result, African American social movements that situate White/Christian system and values as oppressor, or a potential enemy, have not been supported over time by mass.

The Yoruba American act also departed originally on a similar track by declaring separatism and all black nation building. This paper, however, reveals the inimitable points of the Yoruba American socio-religious act by analyzing its historical transformation. This transformation demonstrates shifts in the Yoruba Americans’ ideology that now promotes inclusiveness and flexibility in their demarcation.

## 3. Racial essentialism and (neo)colonialism?

Second, this article examines what types of relationship African Americans have es-

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<sup>3</sup> A socio-political system of the US and its values is based on the Christian cosmology that equates white with superiority. The structure of this system is to protect the present status of white in the US society. White in the US society, according to Marable, only exists as a “power, right, or prerogative” (Marable 1991: 185–191). Also, most Americans reinforce the process of defining White/Christian system and values as their social foundation through education system and mass media (Hutchinson 1997); they are therefore able and forced to retain this social structure. It should be noted that White/Christian in this article has nothing to do with either a European American as an individual nor Christianity as a religion.

<sup>4</sup> For examples about how a practice of blackness as an act of resistance transforms the subjugated into individuals released from the values of oppressor, see Levine (1975), Gregory (1986), Entiope (2001).

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tablished with Africa through social movements, and discusses problems involved in this relationship. In the past African American social acts, their relationship to Africa was often perceived as *a priori* since African descendants organized these acts. There was no need for justifying this relation. Also, African Americans institutionalized most of their social acts based on imaginary/creative objects such as symbols of motherland, traditional culture, African philosophy, and the shared historical experiences, or collective memory, as the oppressed, i.e. slavery and colonialism. These imaginary/creative objects are considered as if all the African countries share them in common, contrarily to the diversity African countries represent in reality.

This article poses two problems regarding African American acts that relate with Africa. First, in the process of uniting with Africa, African Americans contradictorily depend on racial essentialism or biological determinism as early Pan-Africanists, even if they aim to invalidate racism (Appiah 1997). Second, African American acts, intentionally or not, internalize a viewpoint of (neo)colonialism since they are African Americans.

In such a relationship, Americans living in *modern* society crave for *primitive* Africa. Americans have options whether or not they build ties with Africa, because they have socio-economical resources to choose their preference that are maintained by capitalism and imperialism in the US. Additionally, when Americans crave for Africa, they do not expect African individuals but objectified exotic Africa. For instance, to visit historic places such as king's palaces, door of no return, slave trade museums in Badagri, Nigeria or Ouidah (Whydah), Benin Republic, to participate in root searching tours, to taste African food, to view "tribal" dances, and to safari to view wild animals in the game reserves.

For Americans who are *othering* Africa there are no particular individuals with name to call in their concept of Africa but only objectified exotic Africa.<sup>5</sup> Contrarily, Africans are forced to be nameless and voiceless under capitalism and imperialism, which means that they inevitably welcome Americans regardless of their concerns and sentiment. In this colonialism relationship Africa including its citizen, life, society, history, culture, and religion is objectified by a view of Americans (Subject).

Summarily, Americans have no reciprocal relation to their counterparts in Africa. Americans, in other words, can cease building ties with Africa whenever and however they want since Africans are voiceless. Americans do not need to work with African individuals to fulfill their curiosity toward Africa. This type of colonial ideas and practices reinforces disproportional power relation between African Americans and Africa. This article, however, questions the rationale of negating all of the African American social acts that relate with Africa as romantic racism or racial essentialism (Appiah 1997) and as an act of reinforcing

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<sup>5</sup> The same problematic viewpoints are, however, shared among many African Americans who never visited Africa.

colonialism.

To consider two theoretical issues in African American social movements as posed in “Introduction,” this paper scrutinizes the Yoruba American socio-religious movement historically by dividing it into three stages: The birth of Oyotunji village (Chapter 1), transformation of Oyotunji village (Chapter 2), and the new direction of the Yoruba American socio-religious movement (Chapter 3).<sup>6</sup> This paper, then, examines outstanding points that turned their movement inimitable from other African American movements (Chapter 4).

## 1. The birth of Oyotunji village

### 1-1. What is Oyotunji village?

The foundation for the Yoruba American socio-religious movement is located in Oyotunji village, Sheldon, Beaufort County, South Carolina. This site is a sort of a commune where Yoruba Americans lived in mass and practiced Yoruba religion/culture in order to reproduce traditional Yoruba society in the US (Picture 1).



Picture 1 Entrance of Oyotunji village is located a-five-minute drive away from the highway US-17 in Sheldon, Beaufort County, South Carolina. The board on the left side notifies that “You are leaving the U.S. You are entering the Yoruba Kingdom” in the first line, and “Welcome to our land!” in the last line. Photograph by the author.

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<sup>6</sup> This paper is based on the author’s cultural anthropological fieldwork from 2001 to 2009 in Florida, New York City, and South Carolina. Methodology of the research is participant observation, interviews, and recordings by photo and video camera. The names in Chapter 1 and 2 are anonymous to protect the actual identities of my informants.

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Oyotunji literally means that *Oyo* rises again (*tun*) and wakes (*ji*) in Yoruba. Scilicet, Oyo Kingdom constructed by Yoruba revives, in which the determination of Yoruba Americans is clearly stated. Oyo, one of the most influential kingdoms in West Africa, was established as a power in northern Yorubaland at a period of the 14<sup>th</sup> century according to a provision (Smith 1988) and flourished as a city-state between the mid 17<sup>th</sup> and the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century until abandoned approximately in the mid 1830's (Appiah & Gates, Jr., eds. 2003).

Oyotunji village was built by an African American whose name at birth was Walter Eugene King. He was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1928, and later changed his name to a Yoruba-Akan name, Oba Efuntola Osejeman Adelabu Adefunmi I. He is the first *king*<sup>7</sup> of the village as indicated in his name *Oba*, or a ruler, in Yoruba. Oba Osejeman Adefunmi promoted three principles in the establishment of the village: "cultural redemption, racial separation, and the establishment of an all-Black state" in the US (Hunt 1979: 21).

### 1-2. Encounter to and independence of Santeria

Influenced by his families' values, Adefunmi became interested in Africa in his youth. He also figured out that being black in the US was something different from being white.<sup>8</sup> In 1956 Adefunmi traveled to the Republic of Haiti and the Republic of Cuba, and observed that African gods were worshipped in those areas. Returning from the tours, he established a religious organization called Damballa Hwedo in Harlem, New York. Later in 1959, Adefunmi visited Matanzas State, Cuba with a Santeria<sup>9</sup> practicing Cuban American, and was initiated

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<sup>7</sup> Oyotunji village built in the US is not an independent kingdom as appears in the definition of cultural anthropology discipline (e.g., see *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* 1987: 281–282). This paper, however, uses terms king and kingship due to three reasons: First, to take up the meaning described in the village name: Second, to reveal the situations how Yoruba Americans manage issues such as their independence of and dependence on the US welfare service and education system, autonomy over the police power, and identity negotiation. Scilicet, Yoruba Americans need to face the fact that they, intentionally or not, belong to the nation state of the US while identifying with the kingdom of Oyotunji village: Third, to clarify the transformation process of the Yoruba Americans' demarcation from fixed boundary within Oyotunji village to space and time flexible boundary beyond Oyotunji (Koike 2005), i.e. from the kingdom within the nation state to the co-existence of the kingdom and the nation state.

<sup>8</sup> For more details about Adefunmi's youth life history, see Hunt (1979), Pinn (1989), and Onisegun (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Santeria (practitioners identify as La regla de Ocha/Orichas, Lucumi, or Santo) is a syncretic religion that resulted from Atlantic slave trade, and was developed based in Cuba. Religiously suppressed under the slavery, Orisa worship of Yoruba and Dahomey was syncretized with Spanish folk Catholicism and the tradition of French Kardecian spiritualism to be formed as Santeria. Cuban immigrants provoked by the Cuban Revolution (1959) brought Santeria to the US and Puerto Rico (Gregory 1986). Some scholars question the concept of syncretism in Santeria or other African derived religions in the new world (e.g., see Murphy 1988).

into the Obatala (god of creation) priest.<sup>10</sup> Back from Cuba, he established the Sango (god of thunder and lightning) Temple in Harlem, and the following year, the Yoruba Temple and African Theological Archministry, Inc.<sup>11</sup>

Although Adefunmi learned valuable knowledge from Haitians and Cubans practicing Vodun and Santeria, he totally separated from them in 1964. He, then, developed a political party called African National Independence Party and insisted on African cultural retrieval and nation building (Hunt 1979). There are two major reasons for Adefunmi's independence of Haitians and Cubans: First, Haitians and Cubans were concerned that Adefunmi's religious activities in public spheres would cause the US authorities to servile over them since they have historical experiences of religious suppression.<sup>12</sup> Second, Adefunmi disagreed with prominent Christian elements such as saints' worship in Vodun and Santeria practices,<sup>13</sup> since he searched for authentic African religion/culture.<sup>14</sup>

Santeria practitioners often excluded Yoruba Americans from their rituals until Yoruba Americans declared Orisa worship as their own and established their own practices. One of the core members of the movement, Ogunsola, an Osun priest, explained the situations that drove Yoruba Americans to differentiate themselves from Cubans. "In the 50's and the 60's in New York, we (Yoruba Americans) always needed to ask Santeria practitioners for permission even to sit down at the very corner of their rituals. Even if they are the ones who preserved African religion through Santeria and Lucumi, they can't deny us. 'cause African blood is running in our body ... They told us that our way of worshipping Orisa is wrong. You can't say you don't worship Orisa, 'cause your way is different from ours. It's racism. It's really inhuman."<sup>15</sup>

Devotees in the Yoruba Temple considered relocation of their temple. They could not live a traditional life in the residential style in New York, nor could they devote themselves to religious practices every day because of their jobs and other commitments associated with an urban lifestyle (Hunt 1979). Adefunmi and his followers moved out of New York and finally settled in Brays Island, Beaufort County, South Carolina in 1970. Oyotunji village was officially born, and Adefunmi crowned as a political and spiritual leader. Between 1972 and

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Chief Tijani and Odufunke, August 27, 2003

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Chief Tijani and Odufunke, August 27, 2003

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ochabemi, June 17, 2005. An example of Adefunmi's religious activities in Harlem was featured in the article titled as "Harlem's Yorubas" in the *LOOK* magazine together with 5 color photos of rituals (1969: 32–33).

<sup>13</sup> Many Yoruba Americans pursue authentic Yoruba religion/culture. In this they intend to distinguish between Orisa worship and syncretic Vodun and Santeria that might be reduced to slave culture, or the cultural/religious evidence of the suppression, during enslavement and afterwards.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Chief Tijani, November 1, 2003

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ogunsola, May 26, 2001.

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73 the village developed its foundational structures and ideologies and moved its location closer to the high way US-17 in Sheldon, Beaufort County, South Carolina where the present Oyotunji village is located.

### 1-3. How to be a member of Oyotunji village?

Oyotunji village enforced strict doctrines in early days by which Yoruba Americans determined to reproduce traditional Yoruba society practicing Yoruba religion/culture.

Those who wished to be a member of the community needed to go through fixed entrance initiations: First, it was required for a newcomer to stay in the village for six successive months without more than a thirty-day leave, and to abandon their former residence in the US society. Without a source of income, a newcomer became a “servant (sic.)” for a certain chief or family (ibid: 56). Second, a newcomer was obligated to receive *ila*,<sup>16</sup> or a facial mark, within three months after the entrance to the village.<sup>17</sup> A newcomer could be accepted as a member of Oyotunji village by renouncing his or her life in the US society.

The political system of Oyotunji village was kingship. All the resources and rights in the district belonged to a king. Complying with the obligation to pay tax, residents obtained a variety of resources and rights to live in the community (ibid). There were several obligations in the community besides tax payment: wearing Yoruba clothes, speaking Yoruba from dawn to noon, greeting in the Yoruba style called *dobale* (prostrating oneself), *iyuka* (lying down on side; mainly by females), or *ekunle* (kneeling down), and using well water, firewood, and kerosene, instead of piped water, gas, and electricity.<sup>18</sup> Residents were allowed to practice polygamy (ibid).

Members lived their lives under strict discipline to establish their village as a self-sufficient commune. As the community flourished however; there coming confrontations within Oyotunji village as well as in relation to the US society.

### 1-4. Is Oyotunji village against White/Christian system and values?

Regarding himself as a cultural leader, Adefunmi inspired quite a large number of African Americans throughout the US including other ethnic groups and reigned over Oyotunji village. Oyotunji then became the place of new enlightenment where villagers were cultured

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<sup>16</sup> This facial mark, or *ila*, indicates that the carriers belong to Oyo (an ethnic compose of Yoruba). *Ila* for Oyo has three lines of a laser-curved mark of one and a half inch width line beginning from over the jaw born on the cheek to the side of the mouth. Since *ila* is not easily removable, it is the great evidence of living a life as a Yoruba American. There are, however, Yoruba Americans without *ila*.

<sup>17</sup> For more details about entrance process, see Hunt (1979).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Omotolu and Ayodele, April 28, 2001.



and disciplined by their own system, values, and norms.

To ensure these achievements explained above villagers were to be retained as a homogeneous group and more and more African Americans were to be recruited as members. It is a distinctive feature of the Yoruba American socio-religious act that to accomplish these goals they adopted Yoruba religion/culture and practiced them every day, not only spiritually and symbolically but also physically<sup>19</sup> (Koike 2005). However, it is also true that the socio-religious act of Yoruba Americans shared the same scope with other African American social acts in the past, i.e. the ideology of against White/Christian system and values.

This article takes up three limitations concerning the ideology against White/Christian system and values in the Yoruba American socio-religious act: First, Yoruba Americans originally defined Yoruba religion/culture as a means of pursuing separation and all black nation building in the US. Separation would be prerequisite and sufficient condition for producing racism regardless of its style or motive. Scilicet, Yoruba Americans would inevitably accept the race concept and ideology of racism cast by white in order to achieve separation and all black nation building. Moreover, it would be necessary for Yoruba Americans to have a homogeneous potential enemy, or white, to fight against, which would consequently homogenize Yoruba Americans as black. The association of Yoruba Americans with others cannot be unilateral or prescribed, because Yoruba Americans are also varied within, in other words, they are variable depending on the context.

Second, introducing Yoruba system, values, and norms into Oyotunji village was, certainly, a drive to emancipate Yoruba Americans from unbalanced power relation between men and women in the US. It served to empower female residents in the district.<sup>20</sup> Still, Yoruba Americans were not completely autonomous from cultural values of the US, even if they differentiate themselves from other Americans. It is not surprising that many Yoruba Americans interpreted Yoruba religion/culture by the prejudiced understanding of Africa that is spread throughout the US society. An example of this is to harbor fantasy of “men’s utopia” and contempt for women in the everyday life of the village that were derived from discriminatory ideas of polygamy. Female residents, then, took a leadership to redefine Yoruba gender norms (or biased gender roles caused by prejudiced views to polygamy) under the revolutionary American feminism in the mid 1960’s to the 70’s.<sup>21</sup> Yoruba Americans could not always position themselves as against White/Christian system and values.

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<sup>19</sup> For more detail about the idea of physically, see footnote 29, Chapter 2.

<sup>20</sup> In Yoruba, chiefs, priests, and families have seniority and hierarchy, and an act of greetings expresses age and class difference. Even a male should prostrate himself before female in higher status. This Yoruba norm was considered to be appropriate to construct the different men-women relation from the US society.

<sup>21</sup> For more detail about the redefinition process of gender roles in the village, see Hunt (1979).

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Third, Yoruba Americans had a prerogative to decide what could be Yorubanness (Africanness) and the meaning of practicing Yorubanness. They selected certain Yoruba religion/culture to effectively differentiate themselves from other members of the US society. Scilicet, the Yoruba American relationship with Africa was unilateral and self-complacency, because there was not reciprocal dialogues between them. Yoruba Americans only needed objects (Yoruba religion/culture) not Subject (Yoruba).

As argued above, in order to develop the Yoruba American socio-religious act further it was rather impossible to describe the *raison d'être* of Oyotunji village as against White/Christian system and values. It was not realistic to symbolize Yoruba Americans as good and White/Christian system and values as bad.

### **2. The transformation of Oyotunji village**

Oyotunji village flourished between the mid 1970's and the mid 1980's. During that time, some two hundred and fifty residents lived there. Oyotunji, however, began losing its residents from the mid 1980's. Today, there are only a dozen people at the time of the author's first visit in June 2001. Adefunmi also lived outside of the village temporarily due to his declining health condition.

Why did Yoruba Americans leave Oyotunji village to return to the US society? Why did the population in the village decline drastically and why has the village fallen into disrepair? To answer these questions this chapter explores the life of Yoruba Americans living outside of Oyotunji village and their association to the village.

#### **2-1. The instability of the king's authority and legitimacy**

This section focuses one of the factors for the decline of Oyotunji village. When you inquire ex-residents of Oyotunji village about the reasons why they left community, they are inclined to blur the answer and try to change the topic. Their careful selection of words demonstrates their attachment to "hometown" and their faithfulness to the Oyotunji founders. Yoruba Americans living exterior to the village do not renounce but keep sincere ties with Oyotunji. However, a substantial amount of ex-residents occasionally blames and expresses anger toward the village under the private conversation between them and author alone. According to some of these disclosures, violation of the doctrines in the village became prominent from the mid 1980's.

An ex-resident named Ayodele recalled, "You see, one of the reasons why people in the village broke rules is *Oba's* family (the royal family consists of Adefunmi, his wives, and his children) started wearing western clothes one after another. High heeled fancy shoes, frilled blouse, and ... But they never allowed us to do the same. Why I cannot wear a warm sweater that my grandma weaved for me? You know, I wanted to wear it. And they (the royal family

members) were supposed to be the ones who keep the rules first.”<sup>22</sup>

The shifts in dress code by the royal family paved the way for the violation of other ordinances in the village. Consequently, it vitiated not only the ordinance itself but also the authority and legitimacy of the king, or Adefunmi, who reigned the community. Furthermore, introduction of new rules that were unrelated to revive traditional Yoruba society undermined the authenticity of the village. It is because Oyotunji was accredited by their identification with traditional Yoruba society. Additionally, Oyotunji village began facing generation change for both the king and the honorable members. Some members deployed and others were involved in the power game politically and physically.<sup>23</sup> A series of these incidents distracted Oyotunji village, and residents dispersed into the US society.

## 2-2. Members’ discipline or individual freedom?

This section poses other factors for the decline of Oyotunji village. Residents faced an issue of discordance between the discipline in the village and individual freedom. For instance, residents preferred to choose their life partner while obliged to obey marriage rules in the village. Again, Ayodele, who is 30 years old, confessed to the author, “I had a man from the village for my arranged marriage. We were engaged when I was 14. But, you know, I didn’t want to marry him. So, I said no. But Chief Tijani (who had arranged the marriage) was so so mad at me.”<sup>24</sup> Even if Ayodele was born in, raised in, and is proud of Oyotunji village, she could not follow all the doctrines. This instance indicates what types of struggles Yoruba Americans had to experience, who wanted to behave as individuals rather than members of a homogeneous and collective community.

Also, residents had desires to enjoy personal interests such as music culture of hip-hop, rap, and reggae, movie and shopping at the mall, socialization at the dance club, a taste at the (fast food) restaurant, and so forth. Moreover, in the village there were (are) priests who were eligible to conduct divination (Ifa and Merindinlogun) for both residential and visiting clients. Those clients were first guided to the members of the royal family and highly ranked chiefs. It is difficult for general priests to take clients. It is, therefore, natural that general priests had desires to take clients for divination under capitalism independent of the business rules in the community, or unfair customs as complained. Away from Oyotunji village and living in the US society, general priests could be exempted from severe competitions for clients and were able to divine under the law of supply and demand in market.

The *raison d’etre* of Oyotunji village was laid on the very dissimilarity of social, political, economical, religious, and cultural system and values between the village and the US

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Ayodele, September 4, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Ogunsola, May 26, 2001; Ayodele, September 4, 2001

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Ayodele, October 20, 2001.

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society. Yoruba Americans, conscious of this difference, enabled themselves to be proud of and identify with the village. To keep Oyotunji village distinct from the US society it was necessary for residents not only to enjoy privileges but also to be responsible for obligations. Therefore, once residents persisted in individual freedom, or privileges, acquired only in the US society, they inevitably distanced themselves from Oyotunji village. Excessive emphasis on individuality depopulated the village and even imposed a risk of dissolving the socio-religious act of Yoruba Americans.

### 2-3. Pilgrimage to Oyotunji village

Albeit, Oyotunji village was demolished comparing to its prosperous period, it nonetheless exists in Sheldon, South Carolina. Inside of the community has changed greatly; doctrines of the community became moderate, and the US (Western) culture is now proliferated to the great degree all over the quarter. However, ethics are taken for essential that salutation to embody seniority and hierarchy is duly practiced.

In August 27 to 29, 2005 when the Obatala (god of creation) festival was held in Oyotunji village, some sixty-five participants gathered (Picture 2). Despite of the inactivity in other parts of the district, the ceremonial stage called “courtyard” surrounded by Obatala temple



Picture 2 Oba Adefunmi II is leaving a palace, to attend *bembe* for the Obatala festival, 2005. Adefunmi II was surrounded by members of the royal family, elder's society, and warriors. Photograph by the author.

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and Sango temple flourished. Then, a series of spectacle and solemn rites were performed, of which the last ceremony carried on for more than six hours. Contrastively to the period of the mid 1970's to the mid 1980's, many Yoruba Americans today assemble almost once in every month to celebrate for Orisa, Yoruba New Year, *Egungun* (ancestors), King's Day, Damballa Hwedo (nameless African souls elevation), and Reading of the Year: Yoruba Americans gather from all over the US such as Indiana, Pennsylvania, New York, Washington, D.C., New Jersey, California, Texas, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and so forth.

Most people who participated in the Obatala festival held in August 2005 have engaged in Oyotunji village at least for twenty to twenty-five years. They are highly ranked chiefs and priests born and raised up in the village. Among other attendants some have never experienced the life in the village before. They are the (grand) children, relatives, or friends of ex-residents. Others recently discovered the village by coincidence. Still others commute to the village so as to be divined by Babalawo (a priest of Ifa divination), to be initiated into priesthood, or to complete rites of passage for *Egbe Moremi* (women's society), *Egbe Akinkonju* (men's society), or *Egbe Egungun* (ancestor's society). Though the number is rather limited, there are always such new visitors. Therefore, women's society greatly develops its members and men's society is under the reformation for new expansion.<sup>25</sup>

In the rituals for Obatala celebration, the second king of Oyotunji village, or Oba Obalola Adefunmi II, was represented as the highest ranked figure.<sup>26</sup> King and his royal family were given a variety of ceremonial prerogatives. Participants performed rites embodying worship to Orisa and seniority and hierarchy in their culture. Some Obatala priests, recently initiated outside of the village, were unfamiliar with the process of *bembe* (ceremonial session of dances and *oriki*, or chants, to Orisa led by the rhythmical beat of *Onilu*, or Oyotunji men's society drummers) in the village. They received guiding lessons from other experienced priests during the rites. Within a closed society of the village, Yoruba Americans strive to maintain Yoruba religion/culture and keep doctrines in the ways of prosperous days. Yoruba Americans have been, therefore, reproducing Yoruba religion/culture for the second and third generations (Picture 3).

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Lamide, September 8, 2001. Following the reconstruction of men's society in Oyotunji, one of the leading Yoruba American priests in Alachua County, Florida, Ogunsola was trying to build a branch of the Oyotunji men's society in Gainesville from August 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Due to the elevation of Oba Osejeman Adefunmi I in February 11, 2005, the coronation ceremony was held in July 1-4, 2005 to crown Adegbolu Adefunmi, the fourteenth child for Adefunmi I and the third child for Esuogo Oyewole, as the second king of Oyotunji village, Oba Adefunmi II.

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Picture 3 Sango priests were dedicating vivid and furious dance to Sango (god of thunder and lightning) led by the beat of men's society drummers, at *bembe* for the Obatala festival held in courtyard, Oyotunji village, 2005. Photograph by the author.

### **2-4. Gradual but certain growth of Oyotunji village**

Distanced from Oyotunji village, many Yoruba Americans still retain their sincere ties to the community. Most of them affirm association to the community by attending festivities and rituals. This promotes interactions among participants, and brings back ex-residents to the village; however they do not live in the district. As a result, doctrines and Yoruba religion/culture have been reinterpreted. Besides, the secret societies, priest societies, and linkages among participants are reconstructed to welcome new initiates to the society of Oyotunji village. Summarily, the village is reactivated through festivities, rituals, societies, and initiation seekers.

As elaborated above, Oyotunji village has transformed itself, from a commune where the homogeneous and collective identity was forced to a sacred land where individual pilgrimages can be made. Oyotunji provides Yoruba Americans with the collective identity in necessity, but does not force it all the time. Yoruba Americans who left the commune intend to meet both personal interests and socio-economical demands, or individual freedom, by living in the US society. Most of them, nonetheless, practice Yoruba religion/culture in everyday

life (Koike 2005).<sup>27</sup> Even if Yoruba Americans enjoy their rights acquired in the US society in pursuit of personal interests and socio-economical demands like other Americans, they do not easily fall into and are encompassed by a discriminatory category of black. It is because Yoruba Americans create such flexible boundaries where they can live a life as a Yoruba American with their own systems, values, and norms. They are as well constrained to enjoy (be imposed) a negative identity of black that is rooted in White/Christian system and values though (Koike 2003, 2005).

The purpose of the current Yoruba American socio-religious movement is not to accomplish the ideology against White/Christian system and values. In a certain time and space they practice campaigns against White/Christian system and values. In another time and space they enjoy prestige, fames, and authorities (positive evaluations) acquired by a practice of blackness posed by White/Christian system and values. Examples of such a practice of blackness are art, music culture of hip-hop, rap and reggae, fashion, athletic ability, and sexual attractiveness.<sup>28</sup>

To conclude Yoruba Americans have their own spheres, i.e. time and space, for self-affirmation in the US society as well as in Oyotunji village. In other words, wherever and whenever Yoruba Americans are located, the physicality<sup>29</sup> of their religion/culture enables

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<sup>27</sup> Yoruba Americans living in the US society construct a bilateral and reciprocal relationship and communicate with Orisa by 1) altar settings and worship to Orisa, 2) *ebo* or sacrifice, 3) *egungun* worship or ancestor worship, 4) divination, 5) festivals. For more detail about the importance of physically practicable religion/culture of minority in the majority dominant society, see other papers of author's (Koike 2005).

<sup>28</sup> These positive evaluations, however, potentially contain controversial problems such as commoditization of blackness and racialized sexuality that have a risk to contribute to a basis of morpho-racism or biological determinism as a result (e.g., see Gilroy 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Other paper of author's discussed the idea and importance of physicality in the Yoruba American socio-religious movement (Koike 2005). I would like to repeat the definition of this essential idea of physicality though it is lengthy; physicality is defined as any acts that you can practice and experience by using your physical body in contrast to creative/imaginary objects, symbols, discourses, and ideology (hereafter creative/imaginary objects in this footnote). Physicality is acquired through the accumulative and repetitive processes and experiences of embodying certain acts. Physicality requires for practitioners to be committed and be responsible for their acts. This is in contrast to practitioners pursuing their goals through creative/imaginary objects. It is because acquiring physicality necessitates social, political, economical, and cultural negotiations with others in society. As a result, physicality provides a community, or a communal sense, based on flexible boundaries among practitioners, where they can pursue their own values, norms, and identities. Once physicality is established, it is retained more persistently than ideas associated with creative/imaginary objects. Established physicality allows practitioners to have mobile and flexible communities, because the enactment of physicality does not require a static temporal and spatial milieu (Koike 2005). This paper uses the term physically under the same definition.

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them to create their own spheres. They, therefore, can retain and enact their socio-religious movement against odds, through which they can enrich their lives and improve their social status while living under White/Christian system and values.

### 3. From Oyotunji village to Yorubaland

The socio-religious act of Yoruba Americans originally embarked to practice Yoruba religion/culture with which they identified themselves. This act, like other social acts of African Americans, was confined to unbalanced power relation between African Americans and Africa. Americans living in modern society crave for primitive Africa. Americans are Subject, who control over their choice of interests toward Africa. Objectified are Africans who are nameless and voiceless. In such colonialism relationship there cannot be deep reciprocal dialogues between African Americans and Africans.

Significantly, the following examples in the Yoruba American socio-religious movement provide different aspects from the antiquated colonialism power relations of us/them, and even challenge to deconstruct and transform inordinately one-sided power relation between African Americans and Africans.

#### 3-1. Initiations in Yorubaland

This section looks at the experience of a Yoruba American, Ademuyiwa (Ademiwa) Ofunniyin, as an example of driving forces toward the new direction of the Yoruba American socio-religious endeavor. Ademuyiwa is *Babalorisa*<sup>30</sup> and a head representative for a religious organization in Putnam County, Florida called Ile Orisanla, or the house of Orisanla (Obatala), which was officially organized in the fall of 2001. Involved in Orisa worship for some twenty-five years, he institutionalized Ile Orisanla after his third visit to Nigeria.

Ademuyiwa sojourned in Osun state, Nigeria for six weeks from July to August 2001. His primary purpose was to attend the “Study Abroad Program” at Obafemi Awolowo University for Yoruba language and culture instructions, and to be initiated into Babalawo (Ifa, or Yoruba divination, priest).<sup>31</sup> He also had an objective to attend the “5<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Orisa Tradition and Culture” held in mid August in Ile-Ife, Osun State and exchange information with other participants. Ademuyiwa visited an Ifa community known as “House

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<sup>30</sup> *Babalorisa* means a male who are initiated into and received *Orisa* on contrarily to *Iyalorisa* for a female.

<sup>31</sup> It is noted that initiation in Yorubaland is not particular to Ademuyiwa’s case. From early days of Oyotunji village several Yoruba Americans like Osejeman Adefunmi, and other chiefs were initiated into priests (Babalawo in many cases) in Nigeria and Benin Republic. With the wave of globalization, initiation in Yorubaland became more proliferated than ever.



of Culture” in Osogbo, a capital of Osun state, for his initiation. A renowned Babalawo, Chief Ifayemi Elebuibon, supervises this community, to whom another practitioner called Onabamiero Ogunleye introduced Ademuyiwa. Onabamiero is a head of the religious organization called Ifalola in Alachua County, Florida.

Successfully initiated into Babalawo, Ademuyiwa was blessed to encounter the following situation: He was initiated into a society of cultural chiefs and *Egbe Ogboni*, or elder’s society, in Ifon Orolu Kingdom (hereafter IOK), Osun State, Nigeria.<sup>32</sup> IOK, believed to have no less than a-thousand-year history, worships Orisanla as a communal god and initiates into the priesthood and the various societies people within and beyond the community. Becoming members of IOK, they have their names carved in a stone monument, and are offered a piece of land.

Ademuyiwa, initiated as Babalawo, participated in the festivities and rituals and communicated with many Yoruba in Osun state. His experiences led him to query *exclusionism* in the Yoruba American socio-religious movement, and then to embrace *inclusionism*. He also expanded his definition of religion/culture in Orisa worship.

Ademuyiwa excitedly remarked, “You see, in Ifon Orolu Kingdom people worship Orisa and attended rituals regardless of their ‘religion.’ I mean it doesn’t matter if you are a Christian or Moslem. They attended the same ceremony together. So, by now I definitely see Orisa is for everybody who worships Orisa. Orisa doesn’t choose your religion.”<sup>33</sup> Ademuyiwa continued, “I think this example shows how they (people of IOK) consider Orisa and religion. In the Kingdom they plan to build a new royal palace, and they made a model for it. You see a Church on the right side of the palace and a Mosque on the left side.”<sup>34</sup>

### 3-2. Collaborative projects by Yoruba Americans and Yoruba

There were good grounds for the generous treatment for Ademuyiwa and his associates who also went through variable initiations in IOK, Nigeria. Oba Ilufoye Olatoye Orisatoyinbo II J. P., or king of IOK, considered expanding his religious authority to the US. Ademuyiwa was appointed as a member of cultural chiefs and elder’s society in IOK as well as a head of its US agent. Organizing a religious institution called Ile Orisanla, he is currently recruit-

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<sup>32</sup> Ademuyiwa elaborated, “As I received chieftaincy titles, I was ordered by the King of Ifon Orolu to introduce Orisanla (Obatala) and the traditions of Kingdom of Ifon Orolu to the world.” (August 31, 2001)

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Ademuyiwa, August 31, 2001. This notion also derives from what he later explained to me, “I cannot be an exclusionist. My heritage in America is multifaceted. My ancestry includes indigenous Americans and Caucasian French. I identify with Yoruba American but clearly I represent much more than that.” (September 24, 2003)

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Ademuyiwa, August 31, 2001.

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ing members under the king's name of IOK. The establishment of this religious agent was, however, only a part of a greater project that involves collaboration among some Yoruba Americans and some Yoruba.

The greater project is to build "Ifa Academy" in Hawthorne in Putnam County, Florida so as to meet high demands for Ifa divination in the US. The purpose of Ifa Academy is to teach the rich corpus of Ifa divination and train Babalawo. Chief Ifayemi and Onabamiero are also involved in this program. Onabamiero, initiated by Chief Ifayemi, is a religious senior brother of Ademuyiwa. Significantly, the project of Ifa Academy was in process at least by four groups, namely, Ademuyiwa's Ile Orisanla, Onabamiero's Ifalola, and their initiator, Chief Ifayemi's House of Culture, and the Ifon Orolu Kingdom.

Ademuyiwa speaking of Ifa Academy stated, "I was directed to be a chief executive of the academy, and several of Chief Ifayemi's nine children will be instructors. All of his children are Babalawo, including even his two-year-old son. Also, I was asked to buy a three hundred-acre tract for a future site of academy. So, I'm looking for the land. I've already contacted some real estate companies."<sup>35</sup>

The king of IOK came over to the US and visited Ademuyiwa and other project associates as early as November 2001 to confirm an affiliation and start another campaign as well. The king launched another campaign to raise fund for refurbishing Orisanla shrine in IOK, Nigeria. Also, from November 28 to December 3, 2002 Chief Ifayemi visited Ifalola and Ile Orisanla in Florida from Nigeria to provide Ifa divination and training for his religious sons and extended members of respective religious organizations; these two groups duly coordinated Chief Ifayemi's visit.<sup>36</sup>

### **3-3. Building mutual relationship with Africa**

In the initiations and collaborative projects elaborated above Yoruba Americans and Yoruba, notably both of whom are not composed of an anonymous mass but some identifiable individuals, have dialogued directly and depend on each other to promote their assignments. These efforts benefit both sides. In this case Yoruba Americans and Yoruba are developing a cooperative relationship under their particular interest in Orisa worship. To effectively

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Ademuyiwa, August 28, 2001.

<sup>36</sup> Chief Ifayemi was first invited to Alachua County, Florida by Ifalola in June 1998 for Ifa divination, initiation into priesthood, rites of passage, and religious training; and for public educational lecture that was sponsored by Ifalola, Ifa Culture Center in North Carolina, and Mahogany Revue Foundation in Gainesville (Archer, FL, June 21, 1998). Chief Ifayemi returned to Ifalola and Ile Orisanla in February 2004 and August 2005. Once traveling to the US, he sojourns for approximately six months to visit Orisa worship organizations all over the US with which he affiliated by religious activities both in Nigeria and the US.

proceed this venturesome scheme it is necessary for Yoruba Americans to negotiate with individuals in IOK and the House of Culture (Ifa community) to meet both demands. Also, it is necessary for Yoruba Americans to carry out their responsibilities that were pragmatically generated in the association with each individual in IOK and the Ifa community.

What is important in such an association is the fact that both Yoruba Americans and Yoruba are living in and sharing the same world, or modern society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This combined scheme is not only for Yoruba Americans to identify with Yoruba religion/culture and history and to do business but also for Yoruba to deploy profitable business both in Nigeria and the US and to bequeath Yoruba religion/culture to Yoruba Americans. The Africa as described in this chapter is significantly different from the following; first, imaginary/creative objects of African Americans such as a symbol of motherland or an origin drawn from a root reading; second, a bio-genetically investigated origin from a DNA sample or a root investigating trip to Africa. All of these are, in a way, pragmatic but objectifying Africa as a means of African American self-satisfaction that is self-conclusive.

Summarily, primitive Africa no longer remains imaginary/creative objects but human being. At the same time, Americans living in modern society have enough chances to be objectified by a will of Yoruba (Subject). Yoruba Americans should negotiate with their counterparts in Nigeria to secure their own interests. Still, this negotiation should fulfill Yoruba interests as well. Yoruba Americans cannot be irresponsible for implementing projects with Yoruba, since Yoruba Americans are also socially and economically involved in projects by the great degree.

Mutual relationship, as a result, provides some possibilities to improve a ratio of power and profit distribution among some Yoruba Americans and some Yoruba over social, political, economical, and cultural domains.<sup>37</sup> Also, a cooperative association destabilizes and changes the power relation of us/them rooted in colonialism. The socio-religious movement of Yoruba Americans, therefore, does not follow antiquated models of earlier movement, and has reached another stage with new possibilities for both Yoruba Americans in the US and Yoruba in Nigeria.

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<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that both Yoruba Americans and Yoruba could never be fully released from (neo)colonialism. For instance, the king's interest in his expansion to the US is to provide his wife and children PhD education in the US. Suppose there was no authority difference between the education in the US (West) and Nigeria (non-West), could they keep rather balanced power relations like this case? Also, there would be chances for Yoruba Americans who are well trained as priests in IOK to become totally independent of IOK so as to enjoy commoditization of Yoruba religion/culture. For more detailed examination about deconstruction of power relations rooted in colonialism, it is necessary to keep up with their future projects with an analysis of the socio-, politico-economic differences that exist not between Yoruba Americans and Yoruba but in the context of globalization.

#### **4. Membership beyond anti-White/Christian system and values**

##### **4-1. From exclusive to inclusive demarcation**

This chapter examines the transformation of the Yoruba American socio-religious movement from their exclusive demarcation against White/Christian system and values to inclusive one.

Yoruba Americans, in the past, restricted its member qualification to the descendants of Africa, in other words, blacks. This nativist qualification is today being replaced with inclusive one. It is unrealistic to functionalize a boundary dependent upon racial exclusionism in the US society. Today the US society is so complicated that it cannot be divided by a black/white dichotomy. To limit membership of Yoruba Americans to blacks potentially generates unnecessary conflicts against the out-categorized, or white, in the US society.

The same discussion can be appointed to the connotative qualification of non-Christians to be members of the Yoruba American socio-religious act. The reduction of its comradeship to non-Christians provokes unwanted potential conflicts against Christians, which turns their socio-religious act unrealistic. First, it causes misunderstanding that each category of black/white matches with non-Christian/Christian category. It leads a greater contradiction that African Americans, most of whom are Christian, are only given limited opportunities to join the socio-religious act of Yoruba Americans. Second, western ideology and philosophy is inevitably under the influence of Christian values (Lovejoy 1975). People living in the US society cannot help but internalize values through a socio-political and education system of the US (Hutchinson 1997). Summarily, under the direct and great influence of White/Christian system and values, it is clearly impossible to practice everyday life only for anti-White/Christian system and values in the US.

The inclusive demarcation is also adopted in the process of building mutual relationship with Yoruba. For instance, a brochure of Ile Orisanla, or Ademuyiwa's religious organization says, "All races and all religions are welcomed." It is open to any person who is interested in Yoruba religion/culture such as African Americans, Cuban Americans, Nigerians, Kenyans, European Americans, Christians, Muslims, and so forth. This inclusive orientation of Ademuyiwa is acquired by his experiences in Yorubaland and his personal view as described in footnote 32, Chapter 3.

##### **4-2. The more flexible the demarcation, the more sustainable the movement**

Due to the reasons above, a large number of Yoruba Americans living beyond Oyo-tunji village began devoting flexible boundaries. The more flexible the demarcation of the socio-religious act becomes, the more sustainable the act becomes against corruption. In other words, if the movement can succeed recruiting more diverse people than it could, the movement can keep itself developing along with benefits provided by the jointed force of

diversified members. To encompass any others, sharing something in common, in society into the socio-religious act turns its members into both ethnically and culturally volatile,<sup>38</sup> and promotes deep inter-relations. This flexible demarcation, then, results in the avoidance of potential conflicts among members that are caused by the differences in ethnic, religious, cultural, and economical background, religious experience, and commitment to the act.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, the flexible boundary prevents the act from collapsing destructively. Moreover, the flexible boundary prevents the established power, or White/Christian system and values, from dividing and categorizing (Matsuda 1999) the practitioners in order to cause disunity and ruptures from within. It would be plausible for the socio-religious act to lose its basis if its demarcation became extremely indefinite. Yoruba Americans, however, successfully retain their collective identity by modifying the definition of Oyotunji village; from a place of living lives against White/Christian system and values to a sacred land with which they identify and to which they pilgrimage. Simultaneously, Yoruba Americans change their exclusionism orientation towards inclusionism by activating the relationship with Yoruba and adopting diversity in membership so as to sustain enough members.

These new phenomena of the movement, discussed in this article, indicate both initiative and coercive choices of Yoruba Americans in order to enjoy themselves and survive in the US society. Scilicet, it was rather choiceless for Yoruba Americans to adopt flexible demarcation to accommodate themselves into their socio, political, economical environment in the US. Yoruba Americans reached a point where they do not need to struggle constantly against the oppressive society. Yoruba Americans have succeeded creating their own time and space with their own system, values, and norms through Orisa worship strengthened by flexible demarcation. Therefore, they can easily cross the borders between their society and the US society.

In conclusion Yoruba Americans reached a new stage to retain and further develop their socio-religious movement by transforming a former basis of their identity and movement; releasing Oyotunji village from against Whites/Christian system and values.

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<sup>38</sup> In Alachua and Putnam County, Florida participants included Christian African Americans, Christian Nigerians, Muslim Ghanaians, Santeria practicing Cuban Americans, Spiritualism practicing European Americans, and so forth.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, there are conflicts between some Yoruba Americans and some Yoruba. They blame each other with the expression as follows; Ayodele, a Yoruba American, questioned, "African sold us (African Americans) as slaves, so how can we believe them (Africans)?" (May 31, 2001) On the other hand, a Nigerian Yoruba, Asowaju said, "They (Yoruba Americans) cannot claim themselves as Yoruba without proper knowledge of Yoruba language." (September 18, 2001) There are also conflicts between individuals and religious organizations resulting in the difference of religious experience and commitment to the act: Whether they are initiated in Yorubaland or not. Or, whether they consult Ifa divination (*Merindinlogun*) as a profitable business.

## Conclusion

This paper scrutinized two theoretical issues concerning African American social movements through an historical analysis of the Yoruba American socio-religious movement.

First, one of the issues in this paper was the representation of blackness as an act of resistance. If blackness was perceived as an act of resistance against White/Christian system and values, it would create a binary opposition of the oppressed/oppressor. As a result, African Americans are contradictorily forced to remove blackness in order to avoid seen as oppressed black. This paper elaborated that the blackness as practiced by Yoruba Americans is different from an act of resistance against Whites/Christian system and values. Yoruba Americans, therefore, do not necessarily need to fall into either the oppressed or oppressor, and can retain and develop their socio-religious movement.

Second, the other issue in this paper was a relationship to Africa in African American social acts. In other words, this paper questioned the rationale of negating all of the African American social acts engaged in uniting with Africa as romantic racism or racial essentialism (Appiah 1997) without analyzing the socio-political and historical contexts of each acts' and current phenomena such as the Yoruba American socio-religious act. To apply the concept of racial essentialism to any relation-building act between African descendants and Africa has such a great risk to reduce the importance of their collaborated projects, explored in this paper, into merely an act of reinforcing (neo)colonialism.

This paper revealed that critics such as developed by Appiah (1997) could hardly be applied to the Yoruba American socio-religious act. Yoruba Americans adopted physically practicable Yoruba religion/culture to identify with, and embody Yoruba religion/culture in everyday life unlike imaginary/creative objects of Africa. Yoruba Americans also retain a community, Oyotunji village, to physically identify with. Moreover, Yoruba Americans are building a mutual relationship with Yoruba for a stronger and more meaningful association under the conditional and negotiable contexts. This requires Yoruba Americans to negotiate physically with Yoruba to ensure that the needs of both sides are met.

In this case Yoruba Americans cannot enclose Yoruba as imaginary/creative objects for self-satisfaction. It is clear that their socio-religious movement is not based on the idea that Americans living in modern society crave for primitive Africa. Yoruba Americans do not reproduce disproportionate social, political, economical, and cultural power relation with Yoruba. Therefore, the Yoruba American socio-religious movement deconstructed a binary relationship of us/them, and has a potential to transform the inordinately one-sided power relation rooted in colonialism between African Americans and Africans.

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