Looking Back Facing Forward: (Re)imagining a Global Africa

Symposium website: iugsas.wordpress.com

Friday, March 30, 2012

12:30 PM Lunch and informal discussion with Dr. Olúfẹmi Táíwò

IU Art Museum Conference Room – take the elevator or stairs to the third floor and walk through the glass doors of the office. The conference room is located at the back of the office.

Saturday, March 31, 2012

9:00-9:30 AM Registration & Breakfast
African Studies Program Office, Woodburn Hall 221

9:40-10:30 AM Welcome and Morning Panel I
Woodburn Hall 120

Carinna Friesen, Indiana University Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology
“From LPs to MP3s: Music, Technology and Diasporan Ties”

Elizabeth Farris and Susan Kigamwa, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Center on Philanthropy
“The Role of African Diaspora-Led Nonprofit Organizations in Health-Related Philanthropy”

10:40 – 11:40 AM Morning Panel II
Woodburn Hall 120

Jessica Pouchet, Northwestern University Department of Anthropology
“Uhuru Peak: A Symbol of Political Independence, or of Growing Economic Dependence?”

Fileve Palmer, Indiana University Department of Anthropology
“Rainbow Nation”

Mor Gueye, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Center for African Studies
“The Language Issue in African Literature”

12:00-1:00 PM Lunch
Woodburn Hall 221

1:10-2:00 PM Afternoon Panel
Woodburn Hall 120

Justin Wild, IU African Studies Program and School of Public and Environmental Affairs
“What Does Schooling Add to Education?”
No doubt, the idea of Sankofa has become wildly popular ever since the release of a film of the same name by Haile Gerima, the justly celebrated Ethiopian filmmaker. Although the language of origin is Akan, the idea of looking back in order to move forward is one that has currency in other languages and cultures beyond the borders of modern-day Ghana or even the boundaries of the African continent. What is often neglected in explications of the idea by those who deploy it in motley life situations, not least the academy, is that in the context of the African life and thought, it is an injunction that is easy to utter but extremely hard to follow.

I am suggesting that the peculiar contours of African history make it difficult to live the injunction. Yes, slavery is a global institution the many variants of which are to be found in all parts of the world across all boundaries. Yet, there is no other part of the world where the perfect storm of Slavery, the Slave Trade [Trans-Saharan and Trans-Atlantic], Islam, Christianity, Colonialism and Neocolonialism managed, as they did in Africa, to disrupt the flow of history and the constitution of agency—individual and collective—or the delineation of identities—personal, ethnic or national—or the idea of citizenship. The truism of the idea masks this exceeding difficulty.

How does one look back on a near half millennium of crippled agency or loss of control of hybridization processes that have remade land and mindscapes for the continent and its Diaspora? What does one happen upon when one looks back? If looking back is unavoidable if one is really desirous of facing forward it might help a bit, I hope, to isolate some of the obstacles on the path to looking back in a fruitful manner.

I assume that facing forward is not as onerous. Indeed I am convinced that the reason it has been difficult for Africa to face forward is inseparable from the especial difficulties attached to looking back. I shall spend some time working on how not to look back. The challenge of re-imagining a global Africa is bound to become less onerous once we are fairly clear about previous imaginings that are no longer part of the global imaginary regarding Africa and its Diaspora.