MARKETING AFROCENTRICITY: WEST AFRICAN TRADE NETWORKS IN NORTH AMERICA [1]

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For centuries Hausa, Wolof, and Soninke / Malinke merchants, who are known as the professional traders of West Africa have established long distance networks to facilitate commerce. In West Africa Soninke merchants tended to be mobile; they established client relationships along caravan routes. Hausa traders tended to establish satellite communities of their people along major trade routes. As in any system of long-distance trade, merchants created a set of trade practices that reinforced mutual trust, minimized the risk of loss or theft and maximized profits. For most West African traders, moreover, these economic practices have been shaped by Islam, which has an explicit set of principles that govern commercial transactions. Since 1990, thousands of West African traders have come to North America. Most of these, like the West African professional traders of the past are Hausa, Soninke / Malinke, or Wolof. Using New York City as a base of operations, these entrepreneurs have set up North American trade networks fundamentally based upon the time-honored trade practices of their forebears. They have built these contemporary networks to market Afrocentricity. In this paper, which is based upon a six year period of field research mostly in New York City, but also in Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Atlanta, the relationship among Afrocentricity, the West African simulation of an imagined Africa, and the operation of West African trade networks in North America is explored.

One morning in July 1993, Boubé Mounkaila and Sala Fari parked their Econoline van on 125th street just opposite the Carver State Bank, which is perhaps 100 meters from the cultural crossroads of Harlem: 125th Street and Lenox Avenue. They hadn't put much mileage on the van because they used it exclusively to store inventory. Each morning they unloaded their wares and set up their display on rickety aluminum tables; each evening they folded their tables, packed up the van and parked it in a 125th Street garage. That morning Sala, dressed in baggy blue jeans, black tennis shoes, a plain white tee-shirt, a denim vest and a New York Yankees baseball cap, arranged on his table a variety of men's and women's straw hats, which he sold for between $5 and $10. Boubé wore black jeans and a black tee-shirt that had an image

[1] This essay is adapted from the manuscript, *Money Has No Smell: And Ethnography of West African Traders in New York City*, which is forthcoming (The University of Chicago Press) in 2002.

of a homeboy on it – a young African-American male dressed in baggy jeans, tennis shoes and a baseball cap worn sideways. The shirt listed seven major African-American Universities and spelled out in large red letters, "It's a Black Thang." Put together much like the homeboy depicted on his tee-shirt, Boubé arranged sets of Nigerian leather purses and bags (his primary product) as well as baseball caps. Many of the baseball caps carried the logos of professional and college sports teams.

"Georgetown Hoyas sells well," he said. "So do the Chicago Bulls and the New York Yankees."

I also noticed that he had several caps that spelled out Harlem, another several with two men shaking hands that spelled out "Brother to Brother." Finally, I noticed a new item: black baseball caps inscribed with a large silver "X," which, of course, represented Malcolm X.

I asked Boubé about the Malcolm X caps.

"They sell well," he said. "They have put 'X' on everything." He pointed to another table close by that featured "X" tee-shirts and sweatshirts. Boubé admitted that he didn't know too much about Malcolm X. He had heard that Malcolm X had preached on the streets of Harlem and that he founded the Mosque on 116th Street and Lenox and that he had been assassinated.

"They have a good *halal* (Muslim) butcher," he said, "at his 116th Street Mosque. That's where I buy my meat. I also go to that mosque for Jummah (Friday / Sabbath) prayers."

"Where do you get the caps?" I asked him.

"I have two kinds of caps: original and copy. Originals come from Spike Lee. Copies come from Koreans off Broadway." Boubé continued to arrange his baseball caps. "Right now many freres ('brothers,' meaning fellow Africans) are selling 'X' and many people here are buying and wearing it."[2]

For centuries Hausa, Wolof and Sonnike / Malinke merchants, who are known as the professional traders of Africa (see Hopkins 1983), have established long distance networks to facilitate commerce. In West Africa, Sonnike merchants tended to be mobile; they established client relationships along caravan routes. Hausa traders tended to establish satellite communities of their people along major trade routes. As in any system of long-distance trade, merchants created a set of trade practices that reinforced mutual trust, minimized the risk of loss and maximized profits. For most West African traders, moreover, these economic practices have also been shaped by Islam, which has an explicit set of principles that governs commercial transactions.

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[2] Interview with Boubé Mounkaila in New York City, March 17, 1993.

Since 1990 thousands of West African traders, most of whom – like the West African professional merchants of the past – are Hausa, Sonnike/ /Malinke, or Wolof, have come to trade in North America. Using New York City as a base of operations, these entrepreneurs have set up North American trade networks the workings of which are fundamentally based upon the time-honored practices of their forebears. Like Boubé Mounkaila, they have become partners in contemporary North American networks to market Afrocentricity. In this essay, which is based on fieldwork in New York City between 1992 and 1998, I explore the relationship among Afrocentricity, the West African simulation of an imagined Africa, and the operation of West Africa trade networks in North America.

Afrocentricity

Like many West African traders in New York City, Boubé Mounkaila quickly realized that Malcolm X is one of the principal icons of Afrocentrism. For Molefi Asante, the central figure in the Afrocentric movement, Malcolm X is an icon of African culture.

> Malcolm's view of culture was centered principally on an Afrocentric foundation. He did not assert the development of national culture as a result of economic necessity. He neither tried to prove nor would he have been so inclined to prove that historical events were always caused by economic necessity. In reality, Malcolm was an astute observer of the historical conditions of African-Americans and he saw that in the serious reconstruction of African culture, the struggle for power and the ability to create categories which are accepted by others frequently played a much more important role than economic necessity. Beyond this, however, was his insistence on African cultural autonomy by which he meant all things considered cosmological, axiological, epistemological and aesthetical. Given such autonomy it was possible to imagine a culture of resistance as well as a reconstructive culture... (Asante 1993: 29).

For Boubé Mounkaila, the significance of Malcolm X is more mercenary than political. In fact, 'X', which stands for Malcolm Little's lost African identity, is for Boubé and his friends a polysymous symbol of major cultural consequence. Like several of his colleagues in Harlem, Boubé is Songhay. Among the Songhay people of Niger 'X' marks a spot in Songhay ritual: it is one sign for a crossroads and considered a point of power in the Songhay cosmos. It marks the spot of sacrifice during spirit possession and is articulated as a target for power in sorcerers' rites. In these ceremonies, deities occupying the bodies of human mediums draw an 'X' on the sand dance grounds. This symbol marks the point where the priest will slit a chicken or goat's throat. Blood

soaks into the earth where X marks the spot; it nourishes the land and makes it fertile for planting (see Stoller 1989; Coombe and Stoller 1994: 258). In North America, however, the significant religious contours of 'X' are eclipsed by the symbols' economic potential.

In fact, 'X' marks one of the largest merchandising agreements and most controversial marketing campaigns in twentieth century North America. As a consequence, the image, likeness, names, and meaning of Malcolm X has been an ongoing arena of political and legal controversy. The choice of Spike Lee to direct a film about the martyred black nationalist sparked ongoing disputes about Malcolm X's legacy; it also marshaled forces that promoted the commodification of his persona. The late Dr. Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's widow, fought the first round of legal battles with a copyright infringement suit against publishers of the book, *Malcolm X for Beginners*. Opponents accused Shabazz of violating her late husband's code of ethics by prohibiting wider access to Malcolm X's progressive ideas. For her part, Shabazz downplayed her financial interest and stressed her copyright as the proper guardian of Malcolm X's legacy. When publicity for Spike Lee's Warner Brothers film increased the value of Malcolm's persona, she began to assert her proprietary rights (Coombe and Stoller 1994: 261-62). In 1992 *Forbes Magazine* claimed that "[R]etail sales of licensed Malcolm X products, all emblazoned with a large 'X' could reach $100 million this year. (The estate would then collect $3 million in royalties)" (Sullivan 1992: 136). A licensing manager was hired when all assortments of unlicensed X merchandise – even Malcolm X potato chips – began to appear on the streets of New York and other North American cities. By October of 1992, thirty-five licensees had signed contracts, and seventy more were negotiating contracts (Sullivan 1992: 136). This licensing, of course, did not prevent trade in counterfeit Malcolm X goods. Indeed, West African merchants like Boubé Mounkaila bought and sold "originals and copies" of 'X.' Most of his customers, Boubé admitted, couldn't tell the difference between the two – "except in the price" (Sullivan 1992: 262).

The commodification of Malcolm X's persona is one example of how elements of Afrocentrism have been commodified and marketed in North America by African-Americans as well as West Africans. For Asante and other scholars this trend may well be disturbing, for it transfers the force of Afrocentrism from the reconstruction of a historically profound Afrocentric culture among African-Americans to the commodification of increasingly diluted Afrocentric symbols in the commercial mainstream of North American social life. As a consequence, the essential components of Afrocentrism are sometimes lost amid the hype and hoopla of commodification.

Afrocentrism is a philosophically specific orientation to African and African-American sociocultural life; it is a serious attempt to construct an

epistemology based upon principles of African philosophy, principles which, according to Molefi Asante, protect scholars from making interpretive errors – about African and African-American sociocultural life – that devolve from Eurocentric categorizations. Asante says that Afrocentrism is primarily epistemological – a set of guidelines one can use to interpret a wide variety of data. Afrocentrists work in two domains, the cultural / aesthetic and the social / / behavioral, which cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries. In essence,

> ... Afrocentricity is a perspective which allows Africans to be subjects of historical experiences rather than objects on the fringes of Europe. This means that the Afrocentrist is concerned with discovering in every case the centered place of the African (Asante 1992: 2).

More specifically, Afrocentrism is a sustained critique of Eurocentric philosophy, which in Asante's universe means the various constructive philosophies – beginning with Kant and Hegel – that comprise the universalizing modernist project in which elegantly simple explanatory principles are thought to underlie or explain a widely diverse array of data. Asante's orientation is not so much to condemn Eurocentric philosophy, but to suggest that alternate explanations, alternative epistemological sets are needed to fully understand culturally specific sets of data. Put another way, Asante suggests that one needs to use an African lens, shaped through African ideas, to interpret data on African or African-American social life and culture. These African ideas, which he describes comprehensively in two books, *The Afrocentric Idea* (1987) and *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (1990), are derived from African systems of thought, the fundamental tenants of which devolve, according to Asante's Diopian (or diffusionist) view, from Kemet or Ancient Egyptian civilization.[3] Asante argues that all African societies, including those found in

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[3] M. K. Asante seemingly overlooks the fact that critiques of European constructivism have a long history along the side roads of social theory. One thinks here of the critical philosophies of Montaigne, Nietzsche, Heidegger and their philosophical successors, especially Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) and Foucault (1970). In one way or another these thinkers challenged the hegemony of European constructivist and positivist philosophy. Asante's critique, in fact, shares much substance with post-structuralism and postmodernism. Following the work of Jacques Derrida, especially in *Of Grammatology* (1976) and *The Post Card* (1987) there has been a sustained critique of a modernist philosophical edifice founded upon what Derrida calls logocentrism. In the United States the work of Richard Rorty, especially his monumental *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), has powerfully deconstructed the very epistemological edifice that Asante critiques. In essence, a postmodern critique, like that of Asante, underscores the complexity of thought and social life as well as the need to recognize, if not embrace, the fragmented nature and particularistic richness of social thought and social life. From the vantage of a critical philosophy one could see the development of Afrocentrism as part of a growing identity politics that has emerged in the space of postmodernity's condition – itself a result of the unleashing of the forces of globalization (see Keith 1997; Appiah 1992; Harvey 1989). For the past twenty years, in fact, anthropologists have seriously questioned the Eurocentric bias of their discipline, which has had many ramifications in the practice of fieldwork as well as in representational strategies (see Marcus and Fischer 1985; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Tyler 1987; Stoller 1989, 1997, to cite only a few of very many titles). From an epistemological vantage, then, it is wrong to think or imply that Afrocentrism is a lonely, isolated reaction to or corrective of Eurocentric modernist philosophies. It is, rather, part of an ever-growing disenchantment with the philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment.

the New World, trace their fundamental philosophical concepts to Ancient Egypt. A case in point are ideas about harmony-in-the-world associated with the Ancient Egyptian Goddess Ma'at. These concepts include:

[1] *tep* (beginning) which is associated with the adornment of children, late weaning, age-grading, and the cultural importance of fertility;
[2] *pet* (extensions) in which the group is more valued than the individual in a society of extended families that honor their ancestors;
[3] *heb* (festival) in which the group emphasizes ritual in social life;
[4] *sen* (circle) in which the group celebrates in a cyclical rather than a linear cycle of life; and
[5] *meh* (crowning glory), belief in a supreme deity, a quest for harmoniousness as well as a pride in ones life (Asante 1990).

Asante believes that these core social concepts are embedded in the expressive culture of all African people – including African-Americans.

> The transformation of these concepts throughout Africa and the African world has meant that the influence of Kemet continues unabated even in the language and behavior of African-Americans. We are essentially a people of Ma'at, we cannot escape it because it is based upon thousands of years of history (Asante 1990: 93-94).

There are by now many works written by Afrocentric scholars like Asante that focus upon questions of history, the arts, culture, psychology and education. But Afrocentrism is more than the exercise of employing these core principles to the scholarly analysis of things African and African-American; it is also the attempt to extend them to African-Americans through ritual.

The most important and widely practiced Afrocentric ritual is Kwanzaa, which is, in fact, a seven-day African-American holiday celebrated between Christmas and the New Year. Maulena Karenga first celebrated Kwanzaa on December 26, 1966 in Los Angeles. Karenga shaped the festival to celebrate a set of core African values, or what Dorothy Winbush Riley calls "ancient wisdom." This wisdom is more or less what Molefi Asante attributes to Kemet or Ancient Egypt. For Karenga, these values are best articulated in Swahili, one of the most widely spoken languages in Africa. The seven core principles (or *Nguzo Saba*) are:

[1] *umoja* or unity;
[2] *kujichagulia* or self-determination
[3] *ujima* or collective work and responsibility;
[4] *ujamaa* or cooperative economics;
[5] *nia* or purpose;
[6] *kuumba* or creativity; and
[7] *imani* or faith (Riley 1995: 3).

Each day of the seven-day festival is associated with one of the seven sacred principles. On day one, for example, which celebrates the *umoja* principle, people are urged to celebrate in some fashion the principle of unity. On day seven, *imani*, people express their faith through the exchange of preferably homemade gifts.

Just as the serious and complex persona of Malcolm X has been commodified as an 'X' on tee-shirts, sweatshirts, baseball caps, and potato chips, so the complex symbolism and meaning of Kwanzaa has been marketed to the North American mainstream. Originally, Kwanzaa, according to Malauna Karenga, attempted "to reaffirm African culture... It was at the same time a political act of self-determination. The question is how to make our own unique culture. We were talking about Africanization" (Wilde 1995: 69). At first Kwanzaa drew about 200 celebrants. In 1995 an estimated 10 million African-Americans celebrated Kwanzaa. In some sense Kwanzaa...

> is rapidly winning a place on the nation's holiday calendar alongside Chanukah and Christmas. But like all things that succeed in America, Kwanzaa (a word that derives from the Swahili meaning 'first fruits of harvest') has become big business. What was conceived... as a low-key, low-cost ritual centered on table and hearth is now beginning to look a lot like, well... Christmas" (Woodward and Johnson 1995: 88).

Kwanzaa has become, in other words, a mainstream American holiday. This fact has two social ramifications: (a) Kwanzaa is increasingly celebrated by middle class African-Americans who have a great deal of money to spend and (b) the holiday has become increasingly commercial.

> The changing celebration patterns of Kwanzaa reflect national patterns in America, notably the rise of the black middle class and the simultaneous popularization in the 1980s and 1990s of a 'multicultural' ideal in which people assert themselves as members of ethnic minorities instead to integration into the 'majority culture.' In the late 1960s, Kwanzaa was a manifestation of the black separatism of that decade, a backlash by 'revolutionaries' against what was seen as the failed integration of 'black bourgeoisie... (Wilde 1995: 70-71).

Henry Louis Gates, who is perhaps the best known African-American intellectual in the United States, also links the mainstreaming of Kwanzaa to the rise of a black middle class that feels alienated from white society. "'We were the first large-scale number of black people to come to historically white institutions,' he says of his own generation. 'There is a resulting cultural alienation'" (Wilde 1995: 71). Gates goes on to suggest that middle class African-Americans often feel "the guilt of the survivor" and buy Afrocentric items as a way of maintaining cultural fidelity with blackness (Wilde 1995: 71).

Kwame Anthony Appiah, author of the much celebrated *In My Father's House* (1992) has a similar take on Kwanzaa.

> African-American culture is so strongly identified with a culture of poverty and degradation... you have a greater investment, as it were, more to prove [if you are middle class], so Kwanzaa and kente cloth are part of proving you're not running away from being black, which is what you're likely to be accused of by other blacks (Wilde 1995: 71).

For his part, Gerald Early, a professor of African-American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, sees the mass appeal of Kwanzaa somewhat differently from Gates and Appiah. He writes:

> Racial piety also permeates the Kwanzaa principles. Such simple maxims are the sort of earnest ideals that are difficult to oppose or argue with. No one questions whether they really have any connection to the complexity of modern African-American life. The genius of Kwanzaa – the reason it has taken on the air of a mass movement – is that these rather innocuous principles are joined with an historical complaint, one that blacks have long harbored, against the cultural celebration of Christmas (Early 1997: 56-57).

Put another way, Early suggests that the success of Kwanzaa is an expression of African-American alienation from the whiteness of Christmas.

Whatever reason one suggests for the mainstreaming of Kwanzaa, few people – including, of course, West African entrepreneurs in Harlem – can doubt its vast commercial power. During Kwanzaa, Afrocentric symbols including strips of kente cloth, Hallmark Kwanzaa greeting cards, gift wraps and Nia Umoja, a white bearded doll that symbolizes the wisdom of African storytellers, are easily found in gift shops, book stores, drug stores, supermarkets as well as in such stalwart American stores as Sears, J.C. Penny and Montgomery Ward. Afrocentric products are also highly visible at various Kwanzaa Expos. Among the most firmly established of these is the Kwanzaa Expo in St. Louis, established in 1987. It draws some 220 merchants and perhaps 35,000 people during its two-day run (Wilde 1995: 70). The largest Kwanzaa Expo takes place in New York City. Held first in 1981 at a public school in Harlem, the New York Kwanzaa Expo moved to the Jacob Javits Center in 1993. What had been a small commercial gathering needed a larger venue to make space for more than 300 vendors and 50,000 shoppers. Booths representing such mainstream American corporations as Anheuser-Busch, Pepsi, Revlon, Chemical Bank, AT&T and Time-Life Books had been set up. And no wonder... "for the middle-class black community supports a national market for Kwanzaa goods estimated to be worth as much as $100 million (Wilde 1995: 71; see also *The Economist 1994*, A32). In 1995 the New York Kwanzaa Expo featured elaborate arrays of Afrocentric books, cloth, and

crafts – all meant to symbolize in some fashion the seven principles of Kwanzaa. In 1995 the Expo also drew African-American entertainers, savvy politicians and a good number of West African street vendors, like Boubé Mounkaila, and Issifi Mayaki both of whom "sold out" at the exposition. In December 1997, however, they chose not to attend the event at the Jacob Javits Center. "The fees for booths have become far too high," Issifi Mayaki lamented. "We can no longer make a profit."[4]

As savvy entrepreneurs Boubé Mounkaila, Issifi Mayki and their West African colleagues have realized that Africa sells very well indeed in North America. They are, of course, not alone in this realization. Many African-American entrepreneurs are seeking profits by marketing Afrocentricity.

> Five years ago, brightly colored hand-woven Kente cloth, brimless Kufi hats, earthy mud cloths from Ghana and Senegal and bone-toned cowry shell jewelry appeared to be a nostalgic way of dressing among African-Americans. Instead of a short-term fad, these elements have formed an exciting new trend – the Afrocentric lifestyle.
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> African-Americans have placed ethnic products high on their shopping lists. No longer a form of 'alternate' dressing or decorating, Afrocentric merchandise is among the hottest selling retail products on the market, with a growing crossover appeal to mainstream consumers.
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> Many African-Americans are cashing in on this market. For these new black-owned businesses, the key to retailing success lies in selling ethnic products in large volume. But while the spirit is willing, their pockets are not always as deep. To take their message and products to market, many black-owned companies are forming joint ventures with majority-owned corporations, from manufacturing to retail, to underwrite their production, marketing and distribution efforts (Wilkinson 1996: 72).

The tendency to "water down" African objects and tailor them to contemporary African-American lifestyles worries some commentators in the African-American community. Timothy L. Jenkings, writing in a 1995 issue *American Visions* is concerned about dilution of African symbolism in African-America.

> ... Accordingly, as kente-related products have soared into a major market, those who kept their fingers on the pulse of the African-American consumers soon learned that they neither understood nor seemed to care much that the hats, wraps, handbags and now umbrellas ostensibly worn to boast African roots had labels reading 'Made in Taiwan.'
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> Not only was pricing more important than quality and authenticity for such enthusiasts, but the age-old sacred meanings and symbolisms of indigenous culture reflected in such products were oftentimes both figuratively and literally stood on their heads (Jenkins 1995: 4).

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[4] Interview with Issifi Mayaki in New York City, January 28, 1998.

Copying culture

Jenkins's commentary may be somewhat narrow and a bit snobbish, for what he describes is part and parcel of a global phenomenon, the commodification of culture, a phenomenon that is not constrained by class, gender or ethnicity. African-Americans are not the only consumers attracted to diluted symbols or products – Afrocentric or otherwise. Throughout the world people are increasingingly drawn to the copy of the original, to the simulation of the real (see Baudrillard 1983, 1986; Harvey 1989; Coombe 1996, 1998; Connor 1989). Much of this fascination with the copy can be traced to the emergence in the 20th century of mechanical reproduction, the cinematic image in the theater. The allure of the copy has been further intensified through electronic reproduction, the computer image on the information superhighway. These issues have been explored in depth in Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993) in which the author documents powerfully the contemporary fascination with and power of the copy.[5] Drawing upon the work of Walter Benjamin, Taussig identifies the human predilection to copy originals as the mimetic faculty. He says that mimicry is about power. To copy something is to master it. But once it is made, the copy influences the original. The representation gains or shares in the power of the represented and image affects that of what it is an image (see Coombe 1996: 205; see also Taussig 1993).

As we have seen in the marketing of Afrocentric merchandise, the predilection to make copies and copies of copies significantly affects commercial relations as well as margins of profit and loss. In her work on the cultural and political signification of trademarks and copyrights, Rosemary Coombe has focused on how the mimetic faculty affects the political and economic impact of trademarks. In contemporary commercial arenas like a Kwanzaa Expo or the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, Coombe demonstrates how the trademark, which is an image, links the copy with its originator.

> ... A mark must attract the consumer to a particular source that, in mass markets, is often unknown and distant. A logo registers fidelity in at least two

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[5] Although Afrocentrism is a serious attempt to construct a distinct epistemology, if examined from form a vantage of breadth, it is clear that it, too, is part and parcel of the mimetic faculty. From Maulama Karenga to Molefi Asante, Afrocentric scholars have isolated what they consider core Pan-Africa values (Karenga's seven principles of Kwanzaa and Asante's five principles of Ma'at. Applied to scholarship, the creation of rituals, or the promotion of social policy, these Afrocentric principles are, like many Afrocentric products, reproductions, copies of dense and nuanced African systems of thought. They are copies that take on the character of the original, which in the case of Asante's system, existed in the distant past; they are copies, following Taussig (1993) that influence the original. Given the power of the copy in the globalized context of postmodernity, Afrocentrism becomes a system of signs that is transformed into a simulation of reality. Like so many contemporary social movements, Afrocentrism become hyper real. In Baudrillard's language Afrocentrism may… "no longer be a question of imitation, nor of reproduction, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short circuits all of its vicissitudes" (1983: 4).

> senses. It operates as a signature of authenticity, indicating that the good that bears it is true to its origins – that is, that the good is a true or accurate copy. It is exactly the same as another good bearing the same mark, and different from other goods carrying other marks (these are both fictions, of course, but ones that are legally recognized and maintained). The mark also configures fidelity in a second sense; it registers a real contact, a making, a moment of imprinting by one for whom it acts as a kind of fingerprint – branding. But if the mark figures fidelity, it also inspires fidelity in the form of brand loyalty. The consumer seeks it out, domesticates it, and provides it with protective shelter; he makes a form of bodily contact with it. The mark distinguishes the copy by connecting it to an originator and connecting the originator with a moment of consumption (Coombe 1996: 205).

Given the mimetic framework, we can see that Afrocentric marketing is one increasingly important example of the mimetic faculty. The original meaning of an 'X' that refers to the African-American's brutal disconnection from Africa is often eclipsed by more contemporary significations. 'X' also refers to the powerful and prideful Black Nationalist discourse of Malcolm X that can sometimes be heard on loud speakers at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market. It also can be associated with the hype that surrounded Spike Lee's film, *Malcolm X*, the publicity for which sparked the sales of 'X' products. The marketing of 'X,' a central Afrocentric symbol, transformed 'X' into a commodity that bears the considerable weight of current political, cultural, economic and legal machinations. The same can be said of Kwanzaa, which, like all celebrations is, in a paraphrase of Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger, an invented holiday. Celebrants of Kwanzaa have borrowed ideas from Christmas and Chanukah to create a uniquely African-American simulation, to use Jean Baudrillard's language, of an African harvest ritual.

Soon after they began to arrive in New York City in the late 1980s, West African street vendors grasped the economic significance of marketing Afrocentricity. From their rickety card tables along the sidewalks of 125th Street, they began to sell not only such Afrocentric products as kente cloth strips and caps, Malian mud cloth, Tuareg silver jewelry, but also products, like 'X' baseball caps, and certain "trademarked" products (some original, some counterfeit) that have become fashionable among urban African--Americans.

Even though Afrocentric products have been "hot" there are periodic economic ebbs and flows that vary with the season. To maximize their economic opportunities to market Afrocentricity, West African traders in New York have constructed long distance trade networks throughout the United States. These networks enable the traders to follow the cycle of African--American professional and cultural festivals. In 1994 Bandele Publications delighted West African traders by bringing out the first volume of its *Annual*

Small Business Guide to African-American and Multicultural Events: Conferences, Festivals, Shows. Enterprising West African entrepreneurs used this resource that lists the dates, locales, contact people and booth fees for more than 700 vending opportunities to help chart their long-distance trading itineraries. In the spring, summer and fall of 1994, for example, a crew of four Nigerian traders, Hausas all, spent much of their time circulating among African--American festivals in the East, South and Midwest of the United States. That year the lure of profits propelled them to South Carolina to sell at the Spring Fling in Spartenburg, the Gullah Festival in Beaufort, and the Moja Arts Festival in Charleston. They traveled to Chicago to attend the 20th Annual Third World Conference and the African Festival of the Arts. In Atlanta they displayed wares at the Marché Africain / African Market. In Philadelphia they set up booths at the African-American Festival, the Parade and Market. In New Orleans they showed up at the African Heritage Festival International and in Norfolk, Virginia at the AFR'AM Festival. In Detroit they presented themselves at The International Freedom Festival and the African World Festival. In Chicago, one of their best markets, they set up shop at the African Festival of the Arts. They also followed the Black Expo, USA circuit, a traveling exposition that attracts large crowds of African-Americans to regionally organized trade shows that feature and celebrate African-American businesses. In 1994 Hausa traders from Harlem attended Black Expo trade shows in Atlanta, Washington D.C., New York City, Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Milwaukee, Richmond and New Orleans.

One of the principal players in the West African trade network in North America is Idé Younoussa. Idé is a 35 year-old Songhay man from Niger who is known among Harlem's West African street vendors as "The Chauffeur." Although he has resided in Harlem and the Upper West Side of Manhattan since 1989, he spends most of his time on the road. "I have been to more than 20 states in America: Florida, Indiana, Illinois, Texas, Missouri, Tennessee, Oklahoma, even New Mexico. Very beautiful New Mexico. It's like Niger."[6] Idé transports his clients in a white Ford Econoline van with well over 100,000 miles on its odometer. When he travels, he helps his clients load their wares, drives them to their destination, and helps to unload the cargo. He expects clients to pay him a fee for his services; he also insists that they pay for gas, tolls, potential repairs and lodging. These costs are usually evenly split by Idé's charges.

Idé's van is registered in New York State. He has an international driver's permit as well as a license from New York State. When Idé transports his clients to distant locations, he usually drives through the night until

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[6] Interview with Idé Younoussa in New York City, March 17, 1993.

the destination is reached. It takes Idé about 12 hours to travel from New York to Chicago and about 16 hours to go from New York to Orlando, Florida.

> I don't get tired on the road. Driving is my life; it gives me strength. I like the feeling I get on the road. It makes me feel free. I'm hardly ever in New York. Just for one or two days when I come back and then I'm off again. When I went to New Mexico, I made the round trip in only three days.[7]

Idé's clientele is not limited to West African street vendors from New York. He also transports itinerant West African art merchants. These merchants, who will be the subject of a future study, do not reside in the United States. They come to North America on bonafide business visas for three to six months during which they wholesale African Art to North American distributors, to galleries of African Art, to boutiques or to private clients. Like the West African street vendors, the West African Art merchants pay Idé a fee and provide him funds for repairs, gas, tolls, food and lodging.

The epicenter of the West African trading network is New York City, which is where one finds the greatest concentration of West African traders and the goods they import, buy, sell or export back to West Africa. Since 1989 "freres" (brothers), the term West African traders use to refer to one another, have routinely left New York City and have established outposts in Atlanta, Boston, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, New Orleans, Houston, Chicago, Albuquerque, New Mexico and Los Angeles. At these outposts they sell African crafts at local markets and festivals, form wholesale enterprises or establish small boutiques. When "freres" from New York travel to one of these outposts they expect, like their trading ancestors in West Africa, that a local host will receive them. The reception of traveling traders by their local hosts entails some, if not all of the following:

1. temporary storage of goods;
2. extension of credit;
3. facilitation of sales in local markets;
4. food and lodging.

When a local host travels to the network center, in turn, his or her trading partner will receive him or her in a similar manner. These long-distance trading relationships are facilitated by real or fictive ties of kinship, which encompass a mutually binding set of rights and obligations. In North America, these West African long distance trading patterns sometimes have been replicated in modified form.

Some of the traders in New York have blood kin in major markets outside of the city. Ali Boubakar, a Hausa from Dogondoutché in Niger, has

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[7] Ibid.

two brothers who live in the US. One is in Philadelphia; the other lives in Minneapolis. He also has a cousin who lives in Chicago. When he travels to Philadelphia or Chicago, he relies on his kin. He is also their principal wholesale supplier. Most of the traders, however, do not have blood kin in major markets outside of New York City. They rely upon fictive ties born of their shared experience in West Africa and of their commercial expectations as pious Muslims to create a code of mutually binding rights and obligations. In the latter case, hosts who are not blood kin with traveling traders will facilitate the business of their partners but may not house or feed them. For this reason, most traveling traders are prepared to spend several nights at cheap hotels, where four or five of them will share a room. When trading partners come to New York City, however, the "freres" not only facilitate their business, but also house and feed them. The reason for these inequities in hospitality is that in New York City there are many traders who have apartments – and subsequently space – in Harlem, the Bronx and Brooklyn. Outside of New York, the number of "freres" is as limited as is the living space they have to share. Unless visitors have blood kin residing in a place like Chicago, for example, they expect to stay in inexpensive hotels.[8]

In summary, the networks of West African traders in North America are an historical extension of the West African trade networks of the past – with several important differences. First, ethnicity and national origin have become more important than kinship as criteria for membership in North American networks. Second, the North American networks are plugged into economic circuits of greater global dimensions. West African traders in North American are connected to Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Asian networks through an impressive utilization of modern telecommunications. In short, the past is present – with several important twists – in West African trading networks in North America.

Simulating Africa

So far we have seen that marketing Afrocentricity is a complex – and profitable – process that involves centrally the mimetic faculty. As a philosophical doctrine, Afrocentrism is primarily an epistemological stance in contradistinction to Eurocentric philosophy; it is based upon long-standing African principles of philosophy – Asante's Principles of Ma'at. These principles, borrowed from Ancient Egypt or Kemet, are applied not only to scholarly activities, but have been extended to such public policy issues as the curricula in

[8] Interviews with Amadu Bita, Issifi Mayaki, Idrissa Dan Inna and Moussa Boureima in New York City, March 5-6, 1995.

public schools as well as to such public celebrations as Kwanzaa. Afrocentrism also generates ethnic pride: pride in the past greatness and current wisdom of African civilization. Pride in things African – or quasi-African – also generates economic potential. The manufacture and distribution of Afrocentric products has produced yearly sales in excess of $100 million. African-American entrepreneurs have found their niche in this market and have, accordingly, expanded their Afrocentric-oriented companies as well as their Afrocentric-produced profits.

For their part, West African vendors in New York City quickly grasped the appeal of a monolithic Afrocentric "Africa" in the African-American imaginary and in African-American markets. They extended their trading networks beyond New York City to major markets in the American South, East and Midwest, following a circuit of African-American festivals. Whether they do business at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market or in what they call "the bush," which is any locale outside of New York City, these West Africans sell two forms of goods:

> unmarked goods that represent a reified Africa and counterfeit trademarked goods for an African-American market. The African goods, *ersatz kente* cloth scarves, combs, trade beads, leather goods ... are unmarked by any authorial signature or point of origin. West African export-importers, who do not reside in New York, order and bring in products specially made for the Harlem and Black Expo, USA circuit. Knowing what forms Africa must take for an African-American market, they produce generic items that are marked neither by artist, village, cultural area or region. Their distinction lies in their being African – a monolithic cultural whole in the Afrocentric imaginary... (Coombe and Stoller 1994: 265).

The subject position of being a real African in an African-American economic niche that has constructed ideal Africans living in a largely imagined Africa creates some fundamental ironies for West African street merchants in New York City. West African vendors

> find themselves both catering to and resisting a stereotypical image of themselves (as Africans they say that they are seen as more 'primitive' intellectually by some of their clientele) that both benefits them economically and denies their cultural specificity. They, however, may have less at stake in maintaining a ... cultural identity than we, as scholars whose disciplinary authority still rests upon such distinctions, might presume. Knowing something about the history and plight of African-Americans a few ... migrants accept the fact that the 'Africa' African-Americans 'need' is not the one they know. In the Harlem market context they are prepared to renounce recognition of the complexities of the Africa from which they come, and make a gift of the more unencumbered significance it has acquired in the local community (Coombe and Stoller 1994: 265).

One can consider marketing Afrocentricity an economically astute response to ever changing local market conditions. African-American and African entrepreneurs have exploited the opportunities that Afrocentrism has presented them. Realizing a new niche for considerable profits, Corporate America is now producing, marketing and selling Afrocentic products. Saying that marketing Afrocentricity is simply an economically astute response to a changing economic market, of course, does not explain the considerable success of the venture. An Afrocentric reading of this marketing success might suggest that the widespread contemporary appeal of African material culture in North America – however expressed – is generated by the vitality of African social life and the philosophy that it embodies; it also creates a proud link between Africa and Africa America.

Like most readings in the humanities and social sciences, this hypothetical Afrocentric reading is partially true (see Clifford 1988). One cannot deny the appeal of Afrocentric products in North America. And one cannot ignore the expressive vitality of Afrocentric products. And yet, the reading does not consider the ironies of real Africans selling Afrocentric products, representing a monolithic Africa, that are not only made in Africa, but also in Asia and New Jersey, where Asians once reproduced Ghanaian *kente* cloth. When a West African

> vendor dons a hat made in Bangladesh, emblazoned with the slogan 'Another Black Man Making Money' while greeting his customers as 'Brother' on the streets of Harlem, the cross-cutting significations of this performative add new dimensions to an understanding of the black public sphere. Not only does he echo and refract an ironic African-American response to the racism of white America, he also adopts a competitive posture and questions the parameters of Blackness that defines the Man, making his own difference as potentially 'Another Young Black Man.' He is also complicit with the subtextual tensions of ethnicity, gender and class that reverberate from this phrase. The ironies of its traffic through export processing zones in Asia, factories in New Jersey, wholesalers in Chinatown, West African vendors in Harlem and the African--American cultural community do not enable any singular conclusion... (Coombe and Stoller 1994: 269-70).

To better comprehend the contemporary ironies of marketing Afrocentricity, we might also consider it as part and parcel of the global process of what Jean Baudrillard calls "simulation." The difference between, say, feigning an illness and simulating one is, for Baudrillard, fundamental. When patients feign an illness, says Baudrillard, they make-believe that they are sick. When patients simulate an illness, they reproduce some of the symptoms.

> Thus feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and imaginary.'

> Since the simulator produces 'true' symptoms, is he ill or not? (Baudrillard 1983:5).

The presence of simulations therefore confounds objective and subjective, truth and fiction, real and unreal.

The contemporary importance of simulation grew with what Walter Benjamin called mechanical reproduction – the reproduction of phonographic sounds and pictorial images. With the emergence of cybernetic electronic reproduction during the past 20 years, simulation's power has grown exponentially. In simulatory cyberspace the distinction between the real and unreal becomes superfluous. In Baudrillard's language the

> very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction ... At the very limit of this process of reproducibility the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyper real (Baudrillard 1983: 146).

For Baudrillard reality in the contemporary era has disappeared into a game of reality in which signs are joyfully exchanged through a process of endless reduplication.

> It is thus that for guilt, anguish and death there can be substituted the total joy of the signs of guilt, despair, violence and death. It is the very euphoria of simulation, that sees itself as the abolition of cause and effect, the beginning and the end, for all of which it substitutes reduplication... (Baudrillard 1983: 148).

The game of reality found in simulations confounds distinctions between truth and fiction, right and wrong; it elevates nostalgia to new heights.

> The transition from signs, which dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing, marks a decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates the age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate true from false, real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.
>
> When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared (Baudrillard 1983: 148).

This escalation of lived experience and figuration is linked inexorably to what Baudrillard calls the Age of Simulacra. Using a less bombastic language, Manuel Castells positions the collective simulation processes isolated by

Baudrillard in what the former calls the information age. In the information age globalising forces compel the construction of social identities not based upon civil society, but upon communal principles. In Castells language, global forces, such as those that brought West African traders to New York City, compel civil societies to

> shrink and disarticulate because there is no longer continuity between the logic of power-making in the global network and the logic of association and representation in specific societies and cultures. The search for meaning takes place then in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles... (Castells 1997: 11).

In this light the search for cultural meaning and personal meaningfulness in Afrocentrism is centered on, in Baudrillard's language, the reduplication of a monolithic Africa that, in turn, reinforces communal principles in Africa America. The ideal Africa articulated in Afrocentric signs is one in which, to paraphrase Baudrillard, nostalgia is energized, in which ... "there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality..." (Baudrillard 1983: 14). In Afrocentrism, African values, mores, and ideas, do not come from an Africa of the recent past, but have their origin in distant times. Molefi Asante proclaims that African-Americans are people of Ma'at (Asante 1990: 93-94).

In the information age, these complex Afrocentric principles are transformed into signs – an 'X' on a baseball cap, a *kente* cloth shawl, a greeting card with "African" designs, linens with "African" motifs. From an Afrocentric vantage, these signs embody the communal principles of a proud Africa America; they lend a strong hand to African-Americans as they confront the profound difficulty of being a black person in a fundamentally racist society. By the same token, as these signs are commodified in a simulated system of signs, the reduplicatory power of the Afrocentric image overwhelms the referential power of the Afrocentric philosophical principle. "X" may become simply an "in" fashion rather than a symbol for slavery's annihilation of Africa America's connection to Africa. *Kente* may stand for a casual African-American take on Africanity rather than a symbol of Asante nobility.

The ecstasy of the sign, to borrow again from Baudrillard, not only obscures the real and unreal, the simulated and the dissimulated, but also sparks economic engines which today run on the high octane fuel of simulation. Through the circulation of reduplicated signs in the media marketing Afrocentricity creates in North America a simulated Africa. There are "watered down" African designs that appeal – quite profitably – to increasingly widespread North American constituencies. There are festivals like Atlanta's Marché Africain / African Market that attempt to recreate African markets in North American urban spaces. There are crews of Hausa, Malinke

and Wolof traders, constructing their economic selves as "real" Africans. They follow the circuit of these festivals lending to them an "authentic" African presence. And then there are the African markets in Harlem. The 125th Street market, called the African market, was until October 1994 a simulation of an African market. The spatial organization and informal dynamics of the market replicated spatial organization and informal dynamics of markets in West Africa. On 125th street, the cultural crossroads of Africa America, Hausa, Songhay, Fulan, Malinke, and Wolof merchants, self-constructed as monolithic Africans, sold Africana of no distinct ethnic origin to appeal to the ideological popularity of a monolithic Afrocentric Africa. They sold "trademarked" goods to appeal to the more localized tastes. They burned African incense to evoke the Motherland. They addressed shoppers as "brother" or "sister" to appeal to a simulated African / African-American solidarity. They have continued these simulated practices at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market at 116th and Lenox Avenue. Indeed, the Harlem markets direct a circulation of ecstatic signs in which difference is diluted to promote economic activity and profits.

Conclusion

By marketing Afrocentricity at outdoor markets, at trade expositions, in mainstream retail stores, on catalogue pages or in the virtual markets found on the Internet a simulated Africa has emerged in North America. By understanding the importance of the simulation in modern times, West African merchants, who like their forebears, are known for their economic adaptability, have marketed Afrocentricity and enhanced profoundly the profitability of their enterprises in North America. They are, in fact, dynamic local-level contributors to the global economy, who implicitly understand the power and ecstasy of the sign.

Sitting in his booth at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, Issifi Mayaki often burns Meccan incense. One day I asked him why he burned it.

"I like it," he said. "It is also good for business. It reminds my clients that I'm an African. I think they like that. And things that remind the African-Americans about Africa is good for business."[9] Issifi's practice of contexualizing himself – in economic settings like the market or trade shows – is a central adaptive theme in his capacity to market Afrocentricity. Capitalizing upon his Africanity and the fact that he lives in Harlem, the cultural epicenter of Africa America, he and his compatriots have constructed long-

[9] Interview with Issifi Mayaki, January 28, 1998.

-distance trade networks throughout North America to facilitate the sale of their goods at African-American festivals. Like the Harlem markets on 125th Street and 116th street and Lenox Avenue, these festivals are, in fact, simulations of West African markets. Like all simulations in the age of commodified signs, these African examples in the New World have made America a sweet land of opportunity that each year attracts thousands of new West African immigrants to its shores.

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"MARKETING AFROCENTRICITY": REDES DE COMÉRCIO DA ÁFRICA OCIDENTAL NA AMÉRICA DO NORTE

Durante séculos os mercadores hausa, wolof e soninke/malinke, conhecidos como os profissionais do comércio da África ocidental, estabeleceram redes de longa distância para facilitar a sua actividade. Na África ocidental os comerciantes soninke estavam geralmente em trânsito, estabelecendo as suas relações com os clientes ao longo das vias seguidas pelas caravanas. Os comerciantes hausa estabeleciam geralmente comunidades satélite constituídas pelo seu povo ao longo das principais rotas comerciais. Como em qualquer sistema de comércio a longa distância, estes comerciantes criaram um conjunto de práticas comerciais que reforçavam a confiança mútua, minimizavam o risco de perda ou roubo e maximizavam os lucros. Contudo, para a maior parte dos mercadores da África ocidental essas práticas económicas foram enquadradas pelo Islão, que inclui um conjunto de princípios explícitos que regem as transacções comerciais. Desde 1990, milhares de comerciantes da África ocidental chegaram à América do Norte. São na sua maioria hausa, soninke/malinke ou wolof, como os comerciantes profissionais da África ocidental no passado. Estes empresários, fazendo de Nova Iorque a sua base operacional, estabeleceram redes comerciais norte-americanas que assentam fundamentalmente nas práticas comerciais há muito inauguradas pelos seus antepassados. Construíram estas redes contemporâneas para vender o afrocentrismo. Neste artigo – que se baseia num período de seis anos de trabalho de campo conduzido sobretudo na cidade de Nova Iorque, mas também em Filadélfia, Washington D.C. e Atlanta – é explorada a relação entre o afrocentrismo, a simulação de uma África imaginada a partir da África ocidental e o funcionamento das redes comerciais da África ocidental na América do Norte.