

## On Walking Libraries and Challenging Conventional Pedagogies

Kojo Opoku Aidoo

The Humanities Across Borders program represents an intellectually and methodologically disruptive and radical departure from the pedagogical practices that I am familiar with.

In the course of developing a humanistic pedagogy, I encountered griot-like figures (migrants in Ghana, Togo, and Benin) during field stints, who build their knowledge through their analyses of how the world is. They are regarded for their reflective philosophical knowledge, as 'walking libraries' with up-to-date knowledge and histories of their communities. With wide-ranging historical

knowledge, they demonstrate unlimited possibilities for the formal educational establishment. They tell their stories from memory extemporaneously, elaborating on actions and events. These experiences challenge the conventional pedagogical paradigms and call for alternative frameworks. The formal classroom setting with its structural limitations and trappings of scripted literacy curriculum can benefit immeasurably from such wise, knowledgeable griot-like figures.

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## More Questions Than Answers

Stephen Hamilton

Pictured here is a textile produced in India for the Ghanaian cloth market being sold by Jansen Holland, a Dutch company that sells wax prints and other African textiles. It is a black and white cloth that appears to use a combination of a type of compound weave and floating warps. The patterns are taken from *kente*, a fine handwoven cloth originating in central and southern Ghana.

In contemporary Ghana, *kente* has become a marker of national identity, and among African Americans, *kente* has been adopted as a potent symbol of African pride and is still a luxurious fabric, one reserved for special occasions and surrounded by an air of ceremony and honor. Expensive wax print fabrics may be culturally important, precious, and imbued with a sense of prestige, but they cannot compare to the deep cultural significance placed on *kente*.

The need for Dutch cloth producers to insert themselves into the market for handwoven textiles despite already dominating the market for expensive wax prints resurrects images of longstanding colonial exchanges. The dynamics of these exchanges speak to a long history of Europe's fascination with the African cloth market and the complex ways they have managed



Above: Handloom Cloth woven in south India for the West African market at the Jansen Holland Shop, Tilburg. (Photo courtesy of Stephen Hamilton)

to compete with local cloth production using products made in Europe and India.

This trip to the Jansen Holland shop raises many questions about power dynamics and the control of production and distribution in non-white countries to other non-white countries. Who are Jansen Holland's primary competitors in the production of this handwoven cloth? Are they weaving cooperatives, guilds, and independent artisans in west Africa with nowhere near the amount of capital or resources as a Dutch textile company? Are they Chinese and Indian commercial textile producers who also make printed textiles for African consumers? Who are the Ghanaians buying this fabric? What is the economic situation for the Indian weavers producing this cloth? Are they commissioned by this Dutch company or employed by them? What are the dynamics of their interactions with Indian craftspeople?

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## What I Learned at the Saturday Market in Leiden

Orraya Chawnan

The setting of the Saturday Market is a completely different image from the other local shops during the weekdays. It opens twice a week - a small one on Wednesdays, and the main one on Saturdays from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. It is full of local or foreign products and foodstands (e.g. Mabroek). The nature of the market makes it common to visitors, making the experience worthwhile. People come to shop but also to relax and enjoy their Saturdays with family and friends.

During our walk in the market street, we met this old couple who were sitting and enjoying their food. Their names were Harry and Suze, and both were over the age of 65. They left their house for the markets to spend their Saturday in a fun way. Here, in the lively street, the couple eats "herring", a Dutch specialty, a fish from the North Sea, listening to music from the music box,



Above: Harry and Suze enjoying the music and eating herring. (Photo courtesy of Orraya Chawnan)

and enjoying the scenery. So, for me their experience revealed that the purpose of the market is not only about selling and buying things but it turns a space into a communal and interactive place where people joyfully spend their Saturdays.

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Mali, a traveling salesman from Gao trading grain across borders ... With regard to HAB, my arrival in Ouagadougou coincided with the announcement of a four-million-dollar grant awarded to the University of Ghana by the Mellon Foundation, the main sponsor of HAB. The news sparked envious exchanges about advances made by an established and well-connected university like UGH, at Legon.

The institute leaders organized formal and informal meetings on campus and in town. I met with scholars of different generations, many with impressive achievements and long-term studies of their own. The four-day stay reinforced my conviction that personal contact would play a key role in strengthening partnerships, and periodic visits and rotating events, for example around indigo in Mali and Burkina Faso, would help build a self-driven regional platform. The MoU signed thereafter between INSS Ouaga and ISH Mali pointed in the right direction. It should soon translate into joint fieldwork and scheduled visits between the two neighbors. In addition, future events like the Krokobitey (Ghana) workshop on crafts and ecotourism in 2018 opened up perspectives for transdisciplinary exchanges and discoveries within the region. Still, the major interregional gatherings would take place outside the region, in Dar es Salaam

and Amsterdam in 2018, Leiden in 2019, and Chiang Mai in 2020. Such venues limited the numbers of West African participants to a select few. The Covid pandemic cancelled physical meetings. The switch to online platforms drew a further wedge between the (digitally) well-resourced institutions and their less-endowed partners.

Looking back on this period, the activities conducted in the four countries did not coalesce into a dynamic shared platform at the regional level. Does that mean it's all lost? Not necessarily, as I think of the "Crafts as Method" workshop held in Saint-Louis in Senegal in November 2022. With scholars and highly skilled practitioners coming from Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and other continents, it demonstrated the potential for building a productive West African core around indigo, textile, bead, pottery, for example, to get in conversation with other African regions, Asia, Latin America, and so on. So, while the aftertaste of unfulfilled promise lingers, there is still time for a new momentum in the regional platform.

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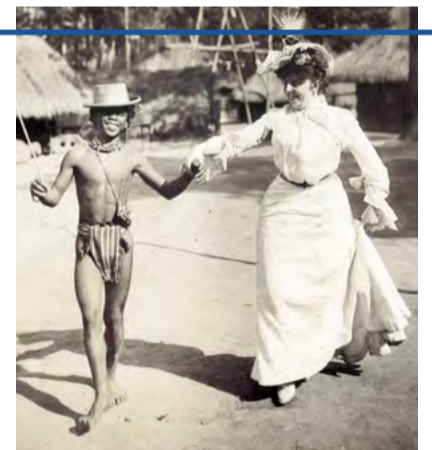
## Recovering the Story of Passive/Insignificant Faces in the Colonial Visual Archive

Enrico Joaquin Lapuz

Pictured on the right is a young boy from the Igorot ethnic group of the Philippines, as he performs the cakewalk, a popular dance of the time, with Austrian-American opera singer Mrs. Wilkins. At a glance, the picture could be interpreted purely from a propagandic perspective, pushing the American ideal of "benevolent assimilation" in showing the positive impact of Western civilization on the savage Filipinos. During the fair, Mrs. Wilkins had taught several singing lessons for Igorot children, with the children having performances of American songs like "My Old Kentucky" in front of exhibitgoers. James Gilbert in his book *Whose Fair?: Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition* argued that the interaction captured could be seen as a glimpse into cross-cultural interaction with 'native' peoples through pop culture, molding and shaping the unknown & exotic into something more relatable.<sup>1</sup> Wilkins acted as a representation of the American citizen, interacting with the 'savage' and unknown Igorots in the photograph, also adding a level of familiarity to the spectacle.

The caption of this photograph given by the photographer Jessie Tarbox Beals, *Mrs. Wilkins teaching an Igorot boy the cakewalk at the 1904 World's Fair*, also perpetuates this by placing the singer as the active participant in the exchange and the point of focus, with the Igorot boy (one of her students) acting as a passive receptacle to receive her knowledge. This is on top of a lack of a name given for the Igorot boy, indicating that what was more important was the act of being taught the cakewalk instead of who it was being taught to. To this day the name of the boy is still unknown, despite appearing in other photographs and this particular photo being on the cover of books and websites that talk about the history of the fair.

Interpretations like these look at the photograph beyond what it initially



Above: A photograph of an Igorot boy wearing a bahag (loincloth), a top hat, and cane while dancing with Mrs. Wilkins, who is dressed in white, during the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Photograph by Jessie Tarbox Beals (1870-1942) and retrieved from the online collection of the Missouri Historical Society.

presented, but in doing so still put the colonial power in the center as the active in this exchange. The American perspective is placed as the focus, when more could be done to enrich the story of the young Igorot.

What was his name? How did the boy feel about this dance? Igorots performed for fairgoers their own cultural dances, such as the celebratory *ballangbang*. In the dance, men played gongs and set the tempo while the women performed the actual dancing. With the cakewalk also being performed in celebrations, did he find similarities to the movement as he takes the lead in the picture, hence the enjoyment on his face? Did he know about the history of the dance, or if so, would he feel different about performing it?

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### Notes

- 1 James Burkhardt Gilbert, *Whose Fair?: Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 152.